

In the Gloomy Caverns of Paganism: Popular Culture, Insurgency, and Nation-Building in Mexico, 1800–1821

Eric Van Young

In a word . . . these miserable Indians live and die not like faithful believers in Jesus Christ, but as though they inhabited still the gloomy caverns of paganism.

An uprisen people is a torrent difficult to contain.¹

The facts of the riot, in brief, are these. On the evening of Thursday, December 7, 1785, a large group of Indian parishioners (the numbers are vague) in the town of Cuauhtitlán, a few miles to the north of Mexico City, launched a riot during which the houses of the local priest, the tith collector, and at least two Spanish merchants were broken into, the windows smashed, and the contents partially looted. The priest himself, who climbed down a ladder from the upper floor in one of the merchants' homes and fled through the patio, claimed he had escaped the rioters with his life only through the prodigious intervention of God and the Virgin.

The occasion for this violence was a rumor that had circulated rapidly among the Indian parishioners gathered at the village church earlier the same evening to attend a religious procession and Mass. The reluctance of the parish priest to bring out of the church a locally venerated effigy of the Virgin Mary, so the rumor ran, was due to the fact that the original statue had been replaced by a new one presumably less holy and less efficacious. This had been done with the priest's connivance under the patronage of a local Spanish woman of means, over the strong objections of the town's Indians and in defiance of an order from the colonial

authorities in Mexico City issued just two days previously. In their petition to the viceroy, the Indians of Cuauhuitlán had praised the effigy for its "singular beauty," the "innumerable prodigies" recommending it to the "tender affection" of the town, and its wide veneration outside the parish itself. The planned repairs to the statue threatened to alter the face, and not just the body, the petitioners alleged, "without acknowledging that the said image belongs to no Spaniard, but only the Indians." In defending his actions after the event, the priest claimed that the body of the statue was desperately in need of repair since it was full of holes serving for rats' nests, the rodent tenants having gnawed the Virgin's clothing to bits.² The priest further averred that "although the origins [of the effigy] are unknown, there are ample grounds for believing that it belongs to the white citizens, and not to the Indians."³

Whatever the case as to the original ownership of the statue or the dynamics of the riot, it is clear that a major element in the conflict was a struggle between contending groups, set off from each other by loose class and ethnic boundaries, each to appropriate a symbolic vessel common to both of them for purposes of group self-definition, political leverage, and the construction of historical memory. The struggle represents, then, a kind of sociocultural parallax—the confrontation of profoundly different views of the human and supernatural worlds, and a deep-running incompatibility of popular and elite mentality and culture.⁴ I have lingered over the episode briefly because it prefigures the lines of social stress that emerged during the wars of independence from Spain a generation later, beginning with the revolt of Father Miguel Hidalgo in 1810. At the same time, it encapsulates and lends temporal depth to the cultural gulf dividing popular and elite Mexican political cultures in the period.

While the incident has in itself little direct bearing on popular views of the late colonial state, it does suggest an underlying mentality that helps to account for the differences apparent between elite and popular ideology: in other words, it may be seen as a kind of metaphor for ideas about politics. On the one hand, the indigenous people of Cuauhuitlán had an extremely concretized view of the icon, and apparently identified its religious significance as inhering most particularly in the physical representation itself, rather than in the manifestation of deity that it represented. On the other hand, the local Spaniards were more than willing to alter the physical aspect of the icon quite substantially, since divinity was (at least in official theology) only represented by the statue, and not immanent in the object itself.⁵ Furthermore, one gets the impression from a close reading of the case that the limits to the non-Indians' willingness to alter the image were aesthetic rather than religious as such. I would suggest that the concreteness evidenced in this incident in the mentality of indigenous peasants conditioned their views of politics as well, so that their main areas of concern tended to be highly circumscribed, most often co-

terminous with the physical and social boundaries of their village communities, and conditioned by the day-to-day realities of peasant life.⁶

When we map this representational habit of mind onto the political landscape of the time, we begin to see how the hyperlocalism so characteristic of indigenous violence, both before and during the 1810–1821 insurgency, might have been produced. By this same measure, the white provincial elite would have been much more prone to experiment with political forms and to see in them expressions of group interest rather than of community, a mind-set much more conducive to viewing the state as an object of manipulation. This is not to say that indigenous peasants had no ideas about politics, nor that Mexican Creoles lay further along some imagined evolutionary continuum in the direction of modernity, but simply that popular and elite views of politics and the state were likely to be rooted in very different cultural assumptions.⁷

In the conventional wisdom, the primary objective of both popular and elite rebels in the movement for Mexican independence was national autonomy and the capture of state power.⁸ But whatever else they may be, states are also mental constructs, and one's perception of them is likely to change as one's structural perspective changes. Our modern preoccupation with the state as the most important locus of political controversy and as the instrument of profound social change, and our reification of it, have led us to the practice of what Alan Knight has aptly termed "statolatry."⁹ I would add here that we may so often focus on the state because we *can* focus on it. That is, we can follow its changes, as opposed to other less visible but no less pervasive processes that may unfold in a local theater and that find, properly speaking, other than obviously "political" or instrumentalist forms of expression. But for people even to conceive of the state they are required to share a cognitive map that includes a view of a wider world beyond locality, and of the integuments that hold it together. For much of the population of late colonial Mexico such a vision did not (indeed could not) exist, and to assume its presence is anachronistic. Furthermore, the objects of popular violence in 1810 and thereafter were not *particularly* representations of the Spanish colonial state—local officials or priests, for example—and even where they occasionally were, there is a difference between figures of authority and the body of the state itself. What seems to have mattered to most humble rural people was not state, but community. In the case of early nineteenth-century Mexico, therefore (to paraphrase a sociological motto that gained some currency a decade or so ago), we may want to think about taking the state back out, or at least of reinserting it into our analysis only carefully, and perhaps at an oblique angle. This essay will explore this view with special reference to a perduring Mexican popular political culture, and of the role played by that culture in conditioning the perceptions of the Bourbon state by country people. A short coda at the conclusion of this essay

offers some speculations as to when and how this element of Mexican political culture may have changed in the postindependence period.

It must first be noted that popular culture as it existed in the colonial period, and as it especially found expression in popular piety and collective outbursts of violent protest, was in part the product both of colonization from above and segmentation from below.¹⁰ Most of the societies of colonial Latin America were created through the forcible bridging by armed conquest of yawning cultural chasms and the substantial obliteration of some indigenous lifeways by the conquerors. During this process the masses of the population passed overnight from a condition of preliteracy to one of illiteracy. Thus in the Spanish American colonial regimes, as in many other conquest or ethnically stratified communities, the split between popular and elite culture was congruent with a racial division cutting across Mexican society horizontally, corresponding roughly to a structure of economic and social domination that lasted well beyond the end of the colonial era. On the other hand, a substantial majority of the Mexican population was composed of Indian peasants living in rural villages. Here the traditional locus of economic, cultural, and personal identity—both “We-ness” and “I-ness,” in other words—coincided in community membership, thus segmenting the Mexican colony socially and spatially from the bottom up along vertical lines.

When large-scale fissures appeared in Mexican society at the beginning of the nineteenth century, preexisting cultural fault lines gave rise to a popular ideology saturated with religious imagery, accompanied by a popular mobilization and violence whose effective range and destructive energy were severely constrained by the very communalist identifications that had engendered them. The contrast of these impulses with the proto-liberal nation-building program of the independence movement’s creole directorate could not have been clearer.¹¹ In the following pages I will take up in greater detail two interlocking aspects of the popular culture of protest: the social and moral geography of village rebellion, with some attention to linguistic phenomena; and popular religious ideology, particularly of a messianic strain. My main objective is not to present a specific set of definitions, or a refined theoretical stance, but to explicate a specific set of historical circumstances with reference to the analytic dichotomy of popular and elite culture. Within this framework it is my contention that the critique of the late Bourbon state fashioned by the creole directorate of the independence struggles, and the project for a national state experimented with in the decades following independence from Spain, were artifacts of an elite, essentially urban culture linked to a European great tradition. The assumptions and preoccupations of that culture and the political projects that arose from it resonated only dully, if at all, with the popular culture of rural and predominantly Indian Mexico.

The Social Localization of Contention

Two lines of evidence suggest strongly that not only did popular and elite rebels have in mind substantially different and mutually contradictory agendas when they took up arms against the Spanish colonial regime, but also that much of the traditional view about the social composition of the insurgent movement is mistaken. An effort at the “social localization” of popular culture is absolutely essential if we are to anchor such divergent beliefs in a historical context rather than in a murky nether region of autonomous ideation.¹² In ethno-cultural terms, the popular following of the separatist banner has been characterized by many historians of the independence movement primarily as *mestizo*, and secondarily as *creole* (that is, Mexican-born white). Such people rebelled, it is thought, out of a combination of motives: disenchantment with the late Bourbon dynasty arising out of the crisis of political legitimacy associated with Napoleon’s meddling in Spanish politics, resentment against exclusion from political office and the rupture of a tacit colonial compact, blocked upward social mobility, a burgeoning nationalist sentiment, and a wide variety of economic grievances.¹³

Three reasons can be adduced for this distorted view. First, the region where the rebellion burst out initially, and others where it enjoyed its most sustained military support and successes, were not heavily Indian in their social makeup. Since these insurgent foci were best documented and have tended to attract the most attention from scholars, the accepted view of the rebellion as being largely *mestizo* and/or non-Indian is in some degree an artifact of our historiography. The second reason is related to the first, and consists in the fact that not many scholars have bothered to mine the rich but difficult and dispersed vein of primary documentation on popular rebels, preferring instead to rely on military reports, the impressions of contemporary eyewitnesses and near-contemporary historians, and so forth.¹⁴ Finally, there is the fact that Mexican history (the ideology of official *indigenismo* notwithstanding) has been viewed by some, especially since the great revolution of this century, as the realization of a cosmic mingling of ethnic strains fated in the New World to produce a great and unique culture. This has meant in turn the construction of anachronistic histories in the service of a burgeoning mythology of nationalism, and a consequent exaggeration of the *mestizo* element in the independence struggles so that *mestizaje* and the *mestizo* could be seen to be playing out their inevitable historical roles.¹⁵

By contrast, my own research on this question indicates that throughout its life, but most especially in its early phases (up to 1814, say), the popular following of the insurgent cause was in the main identifiably Indian as opposed to *mestizo*. This finding is based upon a computer-analyzed

sample of nearly 1,300 individuals captured as insurgents between 1810 and 1815.¹⁶ Of those individuals (about 85 percent of the sample) whose ethnicity can be identified, some 55 percent were Indian, 25 percent (mostly black). This corresponds fairly closely to the generally accepted overall ethnic makeup of New Spain at the end of the colonial period, when the population was comprised of 60 percent Indians, 18 percent whites, and about 22 percent mixed-blood groups.¹⁷ Some well-substantiated conclusions from the sample of captured insurgents extend to other variables as well, including age, marital status, occupation, place of origin, and so forth. To summarize here, the modal rebel of the period turns out to have been a married Indian farmer or rural laborer—a peasant, it is fair to say—of about thirty years old (almost elderly by the standards of the time),¹⁸ probably the head of a nuclear family, and most likely captured within sixty miles or so of his home, a two- or three-day trip by foot.

This last point is of some particular interest, since it provides a picture of the physical mobility of people in times of acute social upheaval, and therefore some insight into the worldview of popular rebels and a subset of cultural ideas they shared among themselves. There are significant differentials among ethnic groups insofar as distance between home and place of capture is concerned. The clearest of these is between Indians and Spaniards (that is to say, whites), the former about four times more likely than the latter to be captured within a short distance (say, three hours or so by foot) of their homes. On the whole, these findings and results of other cross-tabulations among the variables suggest a sort of von Thünen's ring-like arrangement in the propensity of groups in the insurgent population to act in a spatial field centered on their hometowns, villages, and hamlets. Indians, laborers and farmers, and married men tended generally to stay closest to home, while Spaniards, small merchants and muleteers, and single men wandered farthest afield. The most likely interpretation of this, in my view, hinges on differences in mentality among the groups in question. The most important of these in the present context was a metaphorical political horizon defining the effective limits of people's action in collectivities. Indian peasants, who made up the largest group among the insurgents, were profoundly localocentric in their worldview, and their actions tended to be constrained by the political and affective *campesinismo* (a tendency to think of the world, metaphorically, as limited by the horizon as seen from the village bell tower, the campanile) characteristic of their mentality. I would add here the qualification that rural people moved about in traditional Mexico (and elsewhere in Latin America) a good deal more than we had once thought was the case, primarily in connection with wage labor.

Such temporary or seasonal migration, nonetheless, almost certainly took place within fairly narrow geographical limits, and most country

people's physical mobility was probably coterminous with a locality, or at most with a region.¹⁹ Spaniards, on the other hand, were much more likely to enjoy a higher degree of physical and social mobility, to have experienced something of a wider world, and therefore to be able to conceive of an abstract entity such as a nation in whose nominal interest they might take up arms.²⁰ There would appear to be a spatial gradient, therefore, corresponding closely to an ethnic one that reflected not the importance of race *per se* in stimulating or damping collective action, but the largely unarticulated views of different groups as to what constituted the appropriate community of reference for such action.

This analysis of the social composition of the insurgent forces is important because it points us away from a too-great credulity regarding the programmatic elements in elite creole ideology, and instead toward the deeper etiologies of rebellion in the countryside, on the one hand, and factors of a material conjuncture, on the other. In terms of material conditions, the long-term backdrop of indigenous peasant participation in the insurgency, certainly, was formed in part by agrarian grievances and the effects of a generation-long slide in real wages and popular living standards leading up to the climactic year of 1810.²¹ In the generally short-lived village or district uprisings (I have elsewhere likened them to classic European jacqueries) so typical of peasant collective action during this period, moreover, local grievances of long standing against land engrossers and enclosers, against inordinately venal or brutal officials and priests, or between competing village political or kinship factions might provide the occasion and not a little of the affective energy for collective violence. But popular political participation during the insurgent decade cannot be reduced to a reflex of economic grievances, since across the Mexican colony similar economic settings gave rise to dissimilar political manifestations, and similar forms of popular collective action often arose from very different economic environments. The ideas and habits of mind of common country people mediated their perception of their material circumstances or even overrode them, producing here an endemic state of unrest, there prolonged passivity. It is to the realm of social and cultural life—to forms of community and ethnicity, above all—that we must look to provide the missing pieces in the puzzle of popular political action.

Contentious Discourse

There is abundant evidence to indicate that the independence conflict was less a two-way struggle between Mexican colonials and metropolitan power than a three-way struggle among the Mexican rural masses, the elite creole directorate of the insurgency, and the colonial regime. The common cultural and political ground shared by the representatives of the colonial regime with the creole leaders of the rebellion and their allies, in fact,

was much larger than that between the latter and their mass following. There is no appreciable evidence from the trials and confessions of popular rebels or from contemporary observers, for example, to indicate the programmatic elements of proto-liberal, nationalist elite creole ideology resonated very much with popular aspirations or beliefs.²² Nowhere is this more clearly the case than with political discourse and with language phenomena in general, especially if one reads public behavior as texts.

Some of the major reasons for this cultural dead air between and popular rebels are not difficult to identify, and they are betrayed largely by language. First, in the case of late colonial Mexico the potential lines of transmission between popular and elite groups were constricted by cultural and linguistic differences between the progenitors of such formal ideological elements and their potential adaptors. Institutions of secular education—village schools—for Indians and other country-dwellers were common enough in New Spain at the close of the colonial period, but they seem to have achieved limited results at best. Schools existing on paper were very often nearly moribund in fact, and generalized poverty, fiscal constraints, Indian attitudes toward non-Indians living in their villages, and the oft-mentioned need to have children working in the fields and in other productive activities rather than attending schools made attendance very low and progress in educating Indian children slow or nonexistent. For example, the generally indifferent results of the drive to acculturate the Indians of New Spain through secular schools were contemplated gloomily by a high crown official in connection with the 1810 rebellion. Commenting on a report concerning the rural schools in the district of Metzitan, a mountainous area of small villages and dispersed settlement stretching away in the sierra northeast of Mexico City (and which was to prove an endemic focus of rebellion in ensuing years), the official referred to the condition of the schools as “shameful.” More generally, he cited a report published in Guatemala some fifteen years previously stating that in New Spain many Indians were so ignorant that they did not even know how to make the sign of the cross. In addition, he identified the general lack of education as one of the principal causes of the rebellion: “Because [he wrote] is it not well known that the insurgent leaders have taken advantage of the simplicity and ignorance of the poor Indians in matters of religion and politics, to seduce them with false ideas and drag them into the party of rebellion?”²³

A primary concern of the crown in this area was what we would now call Indian acculturation, especially in the area of language acquisition.²⁴ Repeated royal decrees such as that of 1770 stressed that the primary goal of elementary schools in Indian villages should be “[the banishment] from these realms [of] the different languages of the Indians, and that they speak only Spanish.”²⁵ Still, it was not just window dressing, for example,

that put interpreters so frequently at the trials of Indian insurgents and rioters: they served the essential function of putting questions and translating answers. Although we have no statistics on Spanish speech within the half of the Mexican population comprised of rural Indians, it is likely that the proportion of monolingual Indian-language speakers was still quite high by 1800 or so. And how should we expect it not to be so when as much as a century later fully one-quarter of the French population spoke not the tongue of Voltaire and Balzac, but regional dialects?²⁶

In the Mexican case, moreover, the rate of popular literacy was probably extremely low (at a guess, 10 percent) and rural literacy even lower. How could we not expect this to be the case when male literacy among the rural population in England's southeastern counties stood at between 20 and 40 percent in 1840, and in most of Russia in the 1860s at only around 6 percent?²⁷ Late colonial Mexico, finally, seems not to have had a literature of colportage of wide circulation, such as the French *livrets bleus* or the chapbooks and other popular literature of nineteenth-century Russia.²⁸ Thus, notwithstanding my earlier remark about the advisability of “taking the state back out” in searching for the origins of popular rebellion, the language policy of the Spanish monarchy is certainly one area in which the state hit a nerve in its efforts to superimpose over regional and ethnic particularities what can only be regarded as a generalized public culture. As we shall see in a moment, popular religion is another such area. But in the case of language acquisition and other cultural policy I would emphasize that the Bourbon state's active interventionism was one thing, popular perceptions of the locus of social change and political authority another.

We may infer from all this that the diffusion of elite political ideology on a large scale among the indigenous rural masses of the late colony was mechanically difficult and therefore highly restricted. Furthermore, large groups of Indian peasants actively resisted linguistic acculturation from whatever source, though not all with equal fervor or success. Given such circumstances, it is striking (though ultimately hardly surprising considering the ethnic diversity of New Spain) the degree to which language comprised the medium of otherness in instances of village disturbance, whether before or during the insurgency period. The rhetoric and symbolism of legitimacy, and of ethnic and political confrontation, in incidents of village riot and rebellion was extremely complex and balletic, imbricated as it was with collective action and occasionally with fearful violence. Sometimes such rhetorical clashes or impasses actually seem to have replaced physical violence as an instrumentality of confrontation and struggle.

The accounts of many observers and not a few participants demonstrate a fear over riotous discourse and plotting carried out in Indian languages, with the chanting, murmuring, and whispering of groups of Indian

rebels and rioters. This could assume a genuinely menacing quality for non-Indians, with a sense of secret, dark, and cabalistic meanings and certainty of inaccessibility and irrationality. Although many non-Indians spoke Nahuatl or other indigenous languages, most probably non-Indians the fact that much rebellious discourse was carried on in an unknown speech associated with the mercurial, suggestible, and violent brown masses of the countryside must have seemed to them particularly sinister. Accounts by such people of the chanting and shouting that went on in some riotous situations are oddly chilling even at this remove in time, in fact, especially when large groups of people were involved. Not surprisingly, rioting Indian crowds expressed themselves reflexively in Indian languages, even if large elements of them were bilingual. In a *lunardo* in Malinalco in 1803, for example, the *aguacil mayor* (chief constable of the town found the Indian crowd in the patio of the *casas reales* (government offices) very sinister, not least because of the pushing and shoving usually attendant upon such occasions "was added a murmuring or showing their language, and also because everyone talked at the same time."²⁹ This linguistic aggression (and it seems fairly clear that it was aggression, and not just construed as such by jumpy non-Indians) was the opposite side of the coin of official Spanish government language policy in the late colonial period, which insisted upon Hispanizing the Indians of the realm without taking their wishes into consideration.

Rural rebels of all types, on the other hand, including Indian peasants, often manifested a fetishistic concern with written documents and with the inversion of civic rituals. The Indians of Chicontepec, for instance, instituted a sort of village soviet in May 1811, seizing local political power, closing off the pueblo to the outside world, and effectively declaring their village a free and independent commune. When one of the movement's leaders was reproved by his own mother for not having arrested the local *subdelegado* before he made good his escape from the pueblo, he replied, "We can't do anything now because we have no papers."³⁰ The sense one gets from this and other episodes is that papers were a proxy for the legitimacy that generally emanated from the Spanish king but that might on occasion shift its locus to the community as a whole; and that although it might not be precisely clear to anyone exactly what papers were wanting, papers there should be or things were not being done properly. This same principle need not be stretched far to explain the sacking of archives that often took place in the pre-insurgency era, or during village insurgencies or invasions from outside the locality. In the large-scale uprising at the pueblo of Mizantla in 1808, for example, a number of people from among the thousand or so villagers who rioted thoroughly sacked the local archives.³¹ Along with the destruction of ar-

chives—of the written instrumentalities and symbols of colonial repression, in other words—came attacks on jails, from which the prisoners were typically freed, as apparently occurred in the Chicontepec incident in 1811.

What was going on in such cases was the erasure of the proximate levels of colonial authority, and the creation of a space in which community sovereignty and legitimacy might be reconstructed or even expanded, but certainly vindicated at the least. The potency of papers and "the Word" in popular imagination were great, their power sometimes appropriated and sometimes destroyed but always contested and always important. A good deal of public posturing and formulaic discourse—public arrest and revilement, public petition and remonstrance, milling about of crowds in public spaces, and so forth—went on during many village riots both before and during the independence rebellion. This appropriation of public force and occasion for the purposes of civic street theater was partially, of course, a mundane and obvious matter of having a critical mass of people in which rumor, resentment, and the spontaneous agglutination of crowds could occur, since it is difficult for one person to mount a riot. But it also established a putative legitimacy and may actually even have comprised in itself a form of redress of grievances. And even where such guerrilla theater was conducted in Spanish, the appropriation of the rituals and formulae themselves was clearly oppositional rather than co-optational because the reference point of authority was always the local community and not any state, either Spanish or indigenous.

Popular Piety

The second aspect of popular culture and mentality worth exploring in the context of resistance and rebellion is that of popular piety and political eschatology.³² Here again, as with linguistic policy, the hand of the Spanish state was active in forcing the pace of development of a homogeneous public culture during the late colonial period, although the priority of this meddling should not be ranked high in the etiology of mass rebellion. At the lowest level of the religious hierarchy, the heterodox practices of their Indian parishioners had always driven local curates to despair, as of their Indian priest who in 1809 lamented the "deplorable" moral state with the country priest who in 1809 lamented the "deplorable" moral state of his parish and prescribed the "years of blood that should be shed for the loss of their souls, since they have completely abandoned religion."³³ For every curate who took a charitable, protective, but invariably patronizing pastoral attitude toward his flock there was another who viewed his charges as ignorant, lazy, drunken, libidinous sodomites naturally prone to barbarism, violence, rebellion, and backsliding, and these ideas were echoed in the thinking of the upper Church hierarchy.³⁴ The more spectacular manifestations of Indian heterodoxy, such as the recurrent appearance of

native messiahs, though dramatic enough in themselves, were outbraved by such day-to-day practices as shamanism, witchcraft, and fertility cults.³⁵

Parallel to resistance to religious indoctrination, active heterodoxy, and messianism among indigenous people ran a strong tradition of processions of various kinds associated with liturgical events of what are about the last third of the eighteenth century, manifestations of popular piety had been tolerated or even encouraged in keeping with the exuberance of the baroque Church and the doctrines of Tridentine Catholicism. After that turning point, however, the Mexican Church shifted its position with the advent of the Bourbon reforms sponsored by the enlightened Spanish monarchy. Popular forms of piety were therefore stigmatized, restricted, or suppressed outright, provoking considerable (sometimes violent) resistance on the part of Indian villagers in particular.³⁷ Indeed it even seems possible that several of the village jacqueries that erupted in connection with the Hidalgo rebellion in late 1810 may have been linked to frustrations with clerical attempts to suppress popular religious celebrations, especially those of All Saints. The point is that certain forms of popular religious piety identified as noxious by the enlightened Mexican Church entered, *ipso facto*, the substratum of the ideology that nourished heterodoxy and an oppositional political stance readily associated with it.

The conjunction of a local tradition of popular piety (or perhaps better said, crypto-paganism) stretching back to the pre-Columbian period, criticism or outright attempted suppression of elements of that tradition by the Church, and the outbreak of the independence struggle is particularly well documented and exemplified in the case of the important Indian town of Amecameca, which lies to the southeast of Mexico City. In 1810 around All Saints Day—that is, 1 November³⁸ a major riot broke out in Amecameca eventuating in a number of serious injuries, the arrest of hundreds of Indian villagers, a brief coalescence with insurgent activity in the neighborhood, and the necessity for military pacification of the area. The occasion for the riot was the remission by a local Spanish official of a forced work detail of Indian peasants to Mexico City, but the town had been noted for its contentiousness for at least a generation.³⁹ For decades a volatile mix of conflict over land, the contested dominance of a nucleus of native noble families, and tensions between the community and local priests had produced constant litigation, arguments, and recurrent riots, resulting in a situation similar in some respects to that of Cuauhuitlán, which we examined at the beginning of this chapter. Spanish parish priests in Amecameca were perennially frustrated over their failure to extirpate Indian religious pilgrimages and rituals involving a group

The Gloomy Caverns of Paganism

of caves in a hill near the town, known as the Sacromonte, which figured prominently in All Saints and All Souls celebrations.⁴⁰

These same caves had in the early 1530s been the site of several miraculous visions by the Franciscan friar Martín de Valencia, who settled in the town in 1531 and lived there until his death two years later, spending most of his time in the caves. Fray Martín had been the leader in 1524 of the first group of Franciscan missionaries to enter New Spain, the so-called Twelve Apostles, and the Sacromonte was thereafter venerated as a holy site across a wide area. But it seems virtually beyond question that the location was also a pre-Columbian holy place, thus enjoying a continuous sacred identity over a millennium or more, and well into the twentieth century.⁴¹ Beyond this, the particularly strong religious affect attached to the celebrations of All Saints and All Souls, and the elements in them of emphatic localocentrism and ancestor worship, linked together and echoing pre-Columbian practices, made of them ideal flash points for such village uprisings.⁴²

A Messiah without a Millennium

Here it is worthwhile to explore briefly another facet of Indian peasant religious thinking—the dramatic strain of messianic expectation to be found in the plebeian ideology of rebellion—and to link it to what I have been calling the localocentrism of rural Mexican popular political culture. A widespread belief in the messianic attributes of the Spanish monarch apparently prevailed among popular rebels and rioters in New Spain even before the outbreak of the independence rebellion in 1810, and it was specifically attached in the following years to the ferociously reactionary figure of Ferdinand VIII. Many Indian insurgents, in particular, believed that the king himself was in Mexico, and that he not only condoned but also actively led the rebel armies. His person and powers, furthermore, violated the unities of time and space: he performed prodigies of travel, appeared in widely separate locations simultaneously, deflected royalist cannonballs from their targets, and intervened to change the course of battles in favor of the insurgents. Rural people flocked to the rebel standard when the king's name was invoked by canny leaders, and those same leaders are known to have suppressed the news of Ferdinand's restoration to the Spanish throne in 1814 for fear that the loyalty of their Indian followers would ebb if it were known.

It is true that this kind of naive legitimism may be seen as a cross-cultural characteristic of peasant rebellion, certainly, and equally true that it mimicked elements of Iberian and European political culture going back to the medieval period.⁴³ But there are several aspects of it in the Mexican case, two of which I will mention here, that link it to a perturbing popular culture and not just to an imported or superimposed ideology. First, it is

the principles to be embraced and seeks to widen the base of support.

men in Oaxaca), seemed themselves invulnerable to defeat. While guerrilla

pretty clear that a messianic expectation focused on the Spanish king resonated with precolonial indigenous cyclical cosmogony (that is, the return of the culture-hero Quetzalcoatl). Second, it is equally clear that the return of aculturated indigenous villagers of the more northerly, mountainous, and isolated coastal zones of the colony were inclined to cast Indian prophetic kings in the role of messiah, while the settled, peasant villagers of the less Mexico were more likely to choose King Ferdinand or, on occasion, the creole rebel leader Ignacio Allende for the role. My interpretation of this difference is that although a native, popular tradition of messianic expectation survived in many areas of the country, it was more truncated in the Mexican central highlands by long exposure to Spanish evangelization, urban culture, and economic subordination.

A Village Moral Geography

Finally, both before and after 1810 it was frequently (though admittedly not always) the case in village disturbances that the precipitating incidents—often consisting of conflicts with non-Indian landowners, officials, priests, and so forth—arose *outside* the immediate community or at its edge, but *within* the proximate community, the pueblo itself. What I am suggesting here, to return to the metaphor of von Thünen's rings, is a division of social space into at least three concentric zones comprising the immediate peasant village community itself, a proximate area most often corresponding to a geographic region or some smaller part of it, in which the village found itself embedded, and what we may call a matrix community out to the "national" limit. One change that apparently occurred with the onset of the independence struggle is that the zone of tolerable social irritation shrank, so that conflicts or discernances that village-dwellers might previously have construed as acceptable—particularly when focused on European Spaniards, for example—now became noxious. In any case, if this general conceptualization is valid, it supports the hypothesis that the popular worldview was moving in a diametrically opposite direction from that of the proto-liberal elite Creoles who nominally directed the rebellion. On the other hand, village attacks on the representatives of state and local oligarchical authority from 1810 onward do seem to represent a continuity from the pre-insurgency period, so that what changed were not so much the objects of protest and violence, nor the goals or instrumentalities of popular collective action, as the context of such action. The state of virtual civil war existing in the colony for much of the period after 1810 politicized such episodes, turning them from abortive and reactionary outbursts of popular discontent into highly charged political incidents—straws in the hot wind pushed before a political conflagration.

This conceptualization of the moral geography of Mexican village-dwellers helps us to understand a common pattern, especially in pre-1810 rural disturbances, typically pitting a local oligarchy of Indian caciques, rural elites, the local rich, and white power-holders against a vocal minority of peasants who felt themselves marginalized in some fashion; this seems to be essentially what occurred in the Cuauhtitlan episode. The almost formulaic political choreography of these local contestations for power in fact corresponds fairly closely to the worldview of rural nonelite protesters both before and after the outbreak of the independence struggle. To return here to the theme of messianic expectation, there is much evidence to indicate that country-dwellers viewed the central structures of authority at their highest levels—in particular, the person of the Spanish king—as essentially uncompromised in their legitimacy. What they most often disputed or attacked was the legitimacy of authority in the proximate social zone, especially as exercised by Indian notables, local priests, Spanish officials, and others.

On the other hand, elite insurgent ideology disputed the legitimacy and authority of the imperial structure—that is, the outer band or uppermost level of extra-village society—and sought to replace it with a national mythology and protonationalist ideology cobbled together from the particularisms it might salvage from the proximate levels of the colonial structure, the very components country people sought to discredit, dismantle, or keep at arm's length. And it is important to note that the most visible growth point of economic change—the apparent points of strain in local labor systems, man-land relations, agricultural commercialization, and so forth—would have been located precisely in this proximate space between the immediate or primitive community and the larger society. The meaning of rural popular culture for the dynamics of rebellion, therefore, is that Indians particularly among popular-rebel groups, at least in the heartland of New Spain, tended to blur or to simply chop out of their political cosmology the very middle-level structures represented in their thinking by the concept of a nation. This difference in the cognitive map and worldview of Mexicans represented a discontinuity between popular and elite cultures that no political ideology, program, or national mythology could easily bridge.

A Short Coda

By the last third or so of the nineteenth century the situation altered sufficiently so that the political and ideological horizons of rural protesters had broadened. Protest movements in the Mexican countryside from about 1860 or so seem to display a greater propensity for the cross-class and cross-ethnic alliances and coalitions claimed for the independence period.

2. In Mexican history revolutionary movements are almost always preceded by a plan that outlines the principles to be embraced and seeks to widen the base of support.

me never more to capture major cities or to turn back the viceregal army, the most effective independence leaders, Guadalupe Victoria (with two thousand regiments in the mountains of Puebla and Veracruz) and Vicente Guerrero (with a

but largely absent from it for reasons I have suggested. After about 1860 such movements tended to be inscribed more firmly and consciously within coherent ideological frameworks and national projects.⁴⁴ By contrast, the discursive landscape of the late colonial period had relatively widely and monotonously recognized lexical points arising from it, and most of them were claimed or contested by different social groups. Among these were the hierarchical legitimacy (the Spanish king was a rebel, or he was more or less an accident, for example), both associated with religious imagery; the time from both sides of the independence conflict could appropriate single multivocal religious images for diametrically opposed ends. It was the case with the Mosaic references invoked by Father José María Morelos at the Congress of Chilpancingo as well as by Agustín de Iturbide's partisans in the shamelessly adulatory pamphlets and civic rituals celebrating his ascent to the Mexican imperial throne in 1822.⁴⁵

Certainly the existence of a more or less common discursive framework among Mexicans should be historicized rather than taken for granted across time. What seems to be at issue here, more broadly, is the birth—or at least the significant expansion—of civil society in Mexico.⁴⁶ This may be conceived of more concretely as the growth of horizontality in politics, particularly as related to the participation of those formerly excluded in some sense from the “political nation” by the colonial doctrine of the *dos repúblicas* and the concomitant development of rudimentary ideas about citizenship and nationality, including new forms of ordinary socialization, mobilization, and criticisms of the state.⁴⁷ The temporal locus of this process must lie in the period between about 1820 and 1860, but what accounts for the change? A number of factors can be suggested.

First, the politicizing effects of the wars of independence themselves and of the following half-century of political to-ing and fro-ing (episodes generally seen in the prevailing historiography in a strictly negative light) must be accounted a good deal of importance in the creation of Mexican civil society (“the heavens and earth/rose out of chaos”—Milton), and the forging of enduring political ideologies.⁴⁸ Second, the effects on the country as a whole of the Mexican-American War near midcentury should not be underestimated as an ideological crucible for the forging of widely diffused idioms of Mexican nationalism. Third, the growth of an increasingly “national” market in the latter part of the century, along with the increasing movement of people and information this entailed, would have had much the same effect as military mobilization and the forced pace of political enculturation.⁴⁹ Finally, the possible growth of literacy during the early national period, limited as it may have been, or even barring that (or in addition to it) the increased accessibility of print media in the form of political pamphletry and newspapers, most probably acted to spread

ideas among the population at large, thickening the weave of civil society while building and diffusing a common political discourse that gave it voice.

One effect of this on the rural population would have been the valorization of the written word as opposed to the fetishization we have noted for colonial-era protest, and the learning of rules in the political game rather than the continuing mystification of objects as embodying authority in and of themselves.⁵⁰ Whatever the case, it would seem that by the time the French arrived in Mexico with their ill-fated Austrian puppet emperor in the 1860s, at least some popular groups had learned the language of nationalism.⁵¹ And by the time the Mexican Revolution had consolidated itself (ca. 1940), a popular sense of nationalism was firmly in place. Although this process seems quite leisurely, it should be remembered that European nationalism took centuries to develop, and that political culture can appear to move at a snail's pace in comparison to the onrush of political events themselves.

Notes

1. The chapter's epigraphs are drawn, respectively, from a description of the Indians of Temascalzingo pueblo by the local priest, Fr. D. Antonio González Costo, in 1784 (in the context of their suit against him for irregularities in his treatment of his parishioners), and from the statement of an anonymous estate administrator relating the events of a riot by indigenous peasants in the village of San Mateo, district of Mexicalzingo, in 1795; they are to be found in the *Archivo General de la Nación* (Mexico) (hereafter cited as AGN), Criminal, vol. 30, exp. no expediente number, folios 207r-255r, 1785, and AGN, Criminal, vol. 30, exp. 3, no pagination, 1795. Several earlier versions of the paper upon which this chapter is based benefited from useful comments at several points by Jack Goody, Alan Knight, the late Herman Konrad, Jaime Rodríguez, and Paul Vanderwood.
2. It is difficult to tell from the documentation of this episode exactly what the body of the effigy consisted of—a fully realized carved figure, a more primitive mannequin or stick figure, or simply a framework for the support of face and hands, decorated with clothing laid over it. The latter seems the most likely case, since the body is referred to as being “stuffed” and was apparently rather amorphous beneath the presumably sumptuous clothing. Richard Trexler has labeled such icons (simultaneously substantial yet insubstantial) as representations of the “vagueous divine,” raising the intriguing question of what it is that worshippers of these cultic figures thought they were adoring, and where the locus of divinity actually lay; Richard Trexler, “Dressing and Undressing the Saints in the Old World and the New,” paper presented at the Bronowski Renaissance Symposium dedicated to the memory of Michel de Certeau, University of California, San Diego, November 1988.
3. My abbreviated account of the riot of 1785 is based upon the testimony in AGN, Clero regular y secular, vol. 103, exps. 11-12, fols. 403r-436v, 1786. As it turns out, the violent confrontation over the integrity of the statue was only the tip of the iceberg of local conflict that also involved shifts in the access to land resources over the long term in favor of local non-Indian farmers, and within the Indian community from the poor to a more privileged stratum, changes facilitated

Spanish endeavor in the New World and held out Spain as the most Catholic, holy,

Spanish endeavor in the New World and held out Spain as the most Catholic, holy,

2. In Mexican history revolutionary movements are almost always preceded by a plan that outlines the principles to be embraced and seeks to widen the base of support.

While never able to capture major cities or to turn back the viceregal army, the most effective independence leaders, Guadalupe Victoria (with two thousand ragged troops in the mountains of Puebla and Veracruz) and Vicente Guerrero (with a thousand men in Oaxaca), seemed themselves invulnerable to defeat. While guerrilla