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The Mexican Revolution: An Uneven Path

Tre Johnson

Abstract: This study analyzes the peasant and anarchist movement as foundational to La Revolución [the Mexican Revolution] and the revolutionary processes that lead to and followed La Revolución. The study makes the case that unique nature of La Revolución deserves far more analysis. Informed by the work of historian Eric Hobsbawm, La Revolución was born directly out of the world stage; its contradictions were born out of the developing and colonial world. It was during the period of La Revolución, that the fate of the country was ultimately changed by the likes of those who participated in it. The study asks the following research questions: How did the events of La Revolución change the history of Mexico? What sort of events between 1910 and 1940, as well as the laws and regulations that were made during La Revolución affected Mexico during this time, and how did it shape the nation in the end? Finally the study asks how La Revolución changed the thought processes and ideas regarding nationhood and citizenship.

Keywords: La Revolución [Mexican Revolution], Partido de la Revolución Mexicana, Alvaro Obregon, Porfirio Díaz, Emiliano Zapata, Cristero War,

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La Revolución [the Mexican Revolution] is an era that stands out from the rest of history. Within history, there are often many different types of revolutions that bring about the permanent change of a nation or group of people. There are also times where different revolutions cause the violent outbursts of the lower class, taking matters into their own hands. Examples such as the French Revolution and the American Revolution are seen as revolutions that brought about the overthrowing of a government in the case of the French, or the establishment or independence of a nation such as the American Revolution. When the idea of “revolution” comes to mind, it is generally those two historical events that people consider. However, La Revolución’s processes had a much different turn than the those of the American or French Revolutions. Rather, it is shown as a unique case that deserves far more analysis. It was during the period of the Mexican Revolution, that the fate of the country was ultimately changed by the likes of those who participated within it. The question however, is how did these events change the history of Mexico, and how did it change the thought process and ideas going forward? What sort of events between 1910 and 1940, as well as the laws and regulations that were made during the Revolution affected Mexico during this time, and how did it shape the nation in the end?

The Mexican Revolution can be described as two things: an uneven road to walk on, and extremely passive. According to the historian Eric Hobsbawm, the Revolution in Mexico was born directly out of the world stage; its contradictions were born out of the developing and colonial world, as the masses in the early stages played a decisive role (Kaltmeier and Romero; Palmer; Saldaña-Portillo). In this case, the Mexican Revolution is defined as a “passive revolution.” A Passive Revolution, as coined by the Italian politician Antonio Gramsci, is a phrase that defines the state where the unity of the country has not been achieved, yet the unity of a modern state becomes a requirement for the entirety of a social development within a nation (Thomas). It can also be defined as a revolution that takes a long amount of time before anything comes to fruition. Adam David Morton in his essay, *Reflections on Uneven Development*, says that this passive revolution came about in Mexico due to the uneven growth of capitalism within a nation that had harsh political control over the populace (Morton 8). This leads to the first part of the Mexican Revolution, where the populace is mostly involved during this stage of the Revolution.

Political Discourse and the Revolution

The Mexican Revolution originated from political discourse. According to John Womack in his book, *Zapata and the Mexican Revolution*, this turn of events would occur when the politicians in the government were unable to decide who would be next elected after President Díaz died (Womack 10). Though they had declared to the people of Mexico that they were the ones who decided upon the

rules and laws of their country, they were unable to achieve the task of choosing a new ruler, which caused mass hysteria and disarray at a high governmental level (Womack 11).

Díaz had been involved within the governmental system for so long, his involvement was similar to a crutch, as he was the only one sophisticated enough to guide the Mexican government through various alliances. The inability to find a successor during this time, alongside considering too many candidates that did not fit Porfirio Díaz's expectations made him choose the ultimatum: running for president for a fifth time in 1908 (Womack 12). By this point in time, the amendment of being reelected once in a presidency had broken down severely, and further caused more questions as Díaz three months prior had stated that he was stepping down from politics. Unfortunately, the debacle of finding a successor got the better of him, and now, he was once again aiming to rule the empire he had full grasp of. He ran against a man named Francisco I. Madero, and when Madero lost the popular vote and majority to candidate Francisco Leon de la Barra (who was associated to Díaz already), he formed an Anti-Re-electionist group in 1909 against Díaz. This group aimed to destroy the corrupt system that had existed in the Mexican Government (Hammet 201). This was to be the beginning of the Mexican Revolution in full.

What was seen with the influence with President Díaz, and the discontent of Francisco I. Madero shows one of the few issues that will be discussed. For one, the indecisiveness to replace the likes of Díaz with a suitable, strong candidate shows how the Mexican government was unable to function without his influence (Womack 10). Not only that, but it also shows that the Mexican government was rife with corruption. Even behind the scenes, Díaz's influence was felt, as he continued to manipulate the government to his own influence. Not only that, but because of the indecisiveness of the Mexican Government to find a suitable replacement to run against him, he continued to run the country of Mexico under his rule from 1884 up until the elections of 1908 (Womack 10).

While the higher levels of the Mexican administration were suffering from indecisiveness and the inability to root the corruption out from the government, the Mexican Revolution's main faults come from another majority: the peasantry, or specifically, the planters of the country. During the 1890s, the planters experienced the turn of the century in full. The competition of sugar in other countries was catching up to them, and it was becoming increasingly harder to sell sugar from the Mexican market (Womack 49). It was also showing in the fact that the supply for sugar was increasing, and the peasantry could not live up to the demand that was required from them (Womack 49). As a result of trying to pull more sugar from their fields, they were slowly but surely burning out the soil, and making it unusable for farming. The issue that the peasants ran into was

that they were only able to cultivate the land for so long. In addition, this was the cause of the slowing income of money coming from exporting goods (Womack 46). Importing goods became more expensive as a result, making the simplest living material (such as food like beans and corn, staples and cloth) harder to obtain due to the increase in importation pricing. To pay for some of these goods was equivalent to the ability to pay rent in Mexico City (Womack 46).

Because of this, the people were desperately struggling to keep up with the demand, and soon their lands were collected by the government and turned into *haciendas* [plantations] (Womack 49). This was especially true in the state of Morelos, which had faced a majority of the issues and political issues that followed across smaller rural areas within Mexico (Womack 49). The planters within the likes of Morelos rallied around Madero's cause, and he had aimed to achieve a singular thing that no one else could've done at that time: challenge President Díaz and overthrow his rule. He called it a democratic movement to sway the public opinion, and promised to clean up the political sphere (Womack 67). His charisma appealed not only to the people of Morelos, but many individuals across Mexico. His deputies, including the likes of Emiliano Zapata, were able to properly push the people in the right direction; specifically, he was the one who led the people in the land of Morelos (Womack 65). By the winter of 1911, Zapata had become the lead authority figure of the Ayala revolution in terms of its military force, and was able to successfully lead the people of Morelos to a narrow victory; one that wouldn't have been achieved if Madero had not successfully overthrown President Díaz in 1911 (Womack 67). Things were starting to look up for the peasantry, and many believed that Madero would make good promises on his words. However, this was far from the truth. In fact, this would be the reason why the first phase of the Mexican Revolution would break out into the frenzy it was, going on between 1910 to 1920.

An ongoing trend that is seen between both Díaz's presidency, and the likes of Madero's new Presidency was the fact that both would eventually exclude the peasantry from making any decisions. The government for Mexico did not listen to those on the outside, nor did they respond to the crisis with the planters in places such as Morelos. Madero had given his word to the people that he would restore order to politics, and clean up the government when he became president. Although there were multiple other factors involved, he had given them a promise that he was planning on withholding. However, a trend that is seen with the rest of the Revolution leading up to the 1930s, those in the Mexican government consistently belittle and ignore the population of Mexico and their supporters, and often try to push them out of the picture. Madero continuously shows a trend of ignoring and pushing out the general population, something that would later invoke the movement of the Revolution as a whole.

Madero and Zapata's relationship would break down during the months of 1911, and soon, Madero had completely cast aside the relationship between himself and those who had allied themselves with the peasants (Womack 123). When Madero was assassinated in 1913, his biggest supporters, Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata, became the spearheads of the Revolution during the peasantry's peak involvement, and sought to fight and make a change across the nation (Hammet 21). The two of them were tactically aligned in the idea that they had a similar mindset and goal, and that further helped Pancho Villa take over most of Northern Mexico. The Zapatistas (Zapata's rebellion group), held Morelos, Tlaxcala, both South and West Puebla and various other places in the peak of their control, which was 1914–1915 (Hammet 21). This northern countryside event of conquest was shown by Mariano Azuela's *The Underdogs*, as a historical fictional novel that took place during the Revolution. This story, although covering a fictional story and characters, was based on personal experience, where he had joined the army of Pancho Villa as a medic, and used his knowledge he gained over the Revolution as a first hand account (Azuela 6). This account is especially important, as this story details recurring events that may have happened to various groups that were fighting off government forces during the peak of the Mexican Revolution. Azuela did not particularly side with the Revolution for its chaotic purposes, that which many groups in the Revolution fell into. He had fought for a Mexico that would overcome and destroy the injustices that plagued it (Azuela 7).

Role of Peasantry in the Revolution

The peasantry played a very interesting role in the Revolution, from the mid 1910s to the late 1910s. One could say that they were quite prominent during this time period. After all, a majority of them devolved into bandits in the northern part of Mexico, while others formed independent bands that fought in different regions of Mexico (Hammet 211). One could say that they were quite active, but that is not the case. Regardless of how they held the future of certain lands (such as Zapata and Villa holding parts of northern Mexico and Mexico city), they lacked an enforced presence (Hammet 211). The reason why the Mexican Revolution (or rather, the first initial stage of it), was called a passive revolution was because despite the people having an active hand in the chaos that ensued, there was no way for these splinter groups (Zapata and Villa specifically) to hold any merit or enforce the changes they fought for (Morton 16). Despite the joint forces being able to hold 2/3rds of the country in addition to holding the stronghold of Mexico City, they were unable to unite themselves by having a connection between themselves and the working class (Morton 16). There was also the issue of the federal military working on destabilizing the forces of Zapata and Villa, and they had largely succeeded by the end of the

1910s (Hammet 213).

The fighting that the Mexican Revolution had devolved into lasted for ten years, and it wasn't until 1915 that the government got involved once again. The de facto head of government, Venustiano Carranza (who was accompanied by Alvaro Obregon), had fought directly against the combined forces of Francisco "Pancho" Villa and Emiliano Zapata, to push back the peasant revolt (Morton 16). This goes back to the work of Morton's *Reflections of Uneven Development*, as the numerous factors that led these peasant-led armies out of the competition are greatly detailed. For starters, the Constitutionalist Army had stalemated and prevented the combined alliance of Zapata and Villa from going any farther than the 2/3rds of Mexico they already owned (Morton 17). In 1919, Emiliano Zapata was assassinated, and even before that, there was the Constitution of 1917 that made more concessions to the social classes. This allowed them to recognize the social and political rights of those at the bottom rung (Morton 17). In addition, there were also many deals across Mexico that were made between the Constitutionalist Army and the workers in the Casa del Obrero Mundial, where the first labor organization was formed named CROM. This organization would help develop a relationship between the state and the labor organizations.

What sets apart these actions from the beginnings of the Revolution, is that the Constitutionalist Army had begun to change some of the various things that plunged Mexico into war. Beforehand during the presidencies of Madero and Díaz, there was very little acknowledgement of hearing the voices of the lower class. A contrast that can be seen for the Constitutionalist Army is that it had aimed to achieve a progression that was not seen in Mexico prior, and further push it towards a modern standard. As stated by Morton before, the Mexican Revolution for the peasantry was a passive revolution, as they were not the ones to inflict any sort of change during this time.

Rather, a majority of these changes came from the changing government, who aimed to establish stabilization, and continue to bond themselves between the people and the government. The Constitutionalist Army set a new precedent that would become a recurring narrative for the next half of the Mexican Revolution, where a majority of the changes that occurred would be beneficial to not just the government, but also the people as well. One can even see the benefits to the Constitutionalist Army helping out the lower class, as it allowed Alvaro Obregon the support he needed to be elected in 1920 for the presidential term for the next four years (Morton 17). The "revolution" style of the Mexican Revolution ended much earlier before Obregon was elected into presidency, but it was because of the fact that this occurred and the changes were made to both develop Mexico further, as well as establish a bond between the people and its governmental system. The Revolution can also be seen in its phases as not as some sort of radical reformation or change like the French Revolution,

but a reformation of its government and systems (Morton 18). The majority of this change was caused and led by the people of the state, or rather, having the middle class take back the government and appeal to those in the lower class. This phase of the Revolution definitely shows its peak uneven portions. The next era of the Mexican Revolution, which lasted from 1920 to 1940, is often regarded as the reconstruction of the government, as well as taking a new approach to reconstructing Mexico, as well as using the implementing a sense of policy to continue moving in the proper direction.

In order to reinforce and continue moving in a positive direction, Mexico needed to change. A Reconstruction era was needed in order to take the right path forward. The mid-1920s were used as an era to rebuild the Mexican Government and regime, as a way to flatten out the uneven road that had been built all those years ago. Many examples of this arose during the presidency of Obregon, such as the mobilization of the urban and rural societies to connect them to both production and technology lines (Morton 20). This allowed the state to connect the people to the changes of the international world, educating people about the idea of patriotism, popular culture and secularism, but also being able to enlighten them about the ideas of modernity so they could establish the idea to begin to protest and consent to treatment they deserve (Morton 20).

This growth also showed the rejection and oppression of the church, as many who began to embrace the ideas that followed in a modern society began to form during the Cristero War; a war that responded to anticlericalism in its full strength (Morton 20). Slowly but surely, the uneven road that was paved in Mexico began to show itself, though it was not without certain incidents. After all, this road had been paved with violence and conflict, and even the former Constitutionalist Army was not exempt from this. The opening of Cristero War, a war which garnered an intense rebellion from those who felt that Catholics were being oppressed by the Mexican government, struck out against the government itself (Hammet 224). Obregon had led the Federal Army against the rebels, but unlike the Zapatisas before them, they were much more attuned to guerilla tactics, and the Federal Army was both unable to keep up and repel them successfully (Hammet 225). This inability led to his downfall, and carelessness, as he was later then assassinated by a religious Catholic zealot in 1928, leading a vacuum in the seat of power (Hammet 225).

One of the most substantial aspects that continuously leads to this uneven development is the act of violence, or the rebellion of people in the land of Mexico against a higher authority or power. This is not something new that we see here, but it is consistently seen every time a new figure is established in the place of government, time will eventually show that the Mexican people will find some way to revolt and rebel. This has been an ongoing trend since even the 1820s, where Mexico insurgents fought to overthrow the colonial grip that had held

them for numerous times, after establishing a barely functioning constitution that showed their independence from their captors (Hammet 141). Although it is nothing too coincidental, this momentous decision takes place nearly one year before the Cristero War, and ninety before the Mexican Revolution. This perpetual cycle of violence is something that is recurring throughout different generations of the Mexican people, often being the result of similar actions or treatments from the exact same group of people.

Thus, the Church and state conflicts place the country of Mexico back onto an uneven path. This lasted until 1935, further prolonged by the Great Depression, which affected all nations and their sources of income (Hammet 226). Corruption had begun to seep into the wells of the government once more by the late 1920s, now focusing on stopping agrarian reform after Plutarco Elías Calles had become president when the late Obregon had died (Hammet 229). The Great Depression was something that took higher priority, though. As if it was both a boon and a bane to the government, it forced them to turn an eye to the social problems at hand. Although the Great Depression did not hurt the economy as badly as other countries (due to the exports seen at this time were taken by other competitors), it was still imperative to preserve the economy and ensure that the Agricultural growth rate did not fall below those in the 1910s (Hammet 230).

A certain move given by Calles was going to bear fruit for the future of Mexico; and that was the choosing of presidential candidate Lázaro Cárdenas, who was seen to carry the “six year plan” that Calles and his party, the PNR (National Revolutionary Party), would use to promote the middle class farmer equivalent to the ejido, which were large plots of land owned by a singular person (Morton 23). Many would criticize Cardenas for being a puppet of Calles; by this point, Calles had already had three prior puppets in the president position, acting as his mouthpiece long after he had no longer been seated in the president position (Hammet 227). However, it would be Cardenas that would effectively flatten the road for Mexico to walk upon for a long time. The establishment of his presidency and the policies that would follow, smoothed out a road that was paved with corruption and violence. The presidency of Lázaro Cárdenas was the turning point, as the six year plan would be given to strengthen the union organizations, the train workers and peasants. His goal was simple: it was to forge a bond with the people, and to establish mass support amongst people of all levels of their society. His policies were popular with the peasantry; one of the actions he used was to reduce the power of the hacienda, by further putting the strength of the people back into their own hands (Hammet 231). While they were not completely done away with, the hacienda were severely weakened and challenged by those who wished to continue the idea of land distribution. This allowed the land to be redistributed back as ejidos and not under the haciendas,

something that Cardenas had rallied against when he was in office; his major political irks were the fact that he did not like land being privately owned, and rather be redistributed back into the general population (Morton 25).

One of Cardenas' few achievements going forward and leaving a mark upon Mexican history as a whole, was his ability to unify the entirety of both the government and the people. As Mexico continued to head in the direction of becoming part of the modern world, it needed unity to stand up to foreign intervention; something that for many years, it did not perfectly show (Hammet 237). Additionally, there was a need to unite the peasantry and give them faith with the government, as the aftermath of the Cristero Rebellion showed various weaknesses in the government and how it was run (Hammet 231). Though, one major accomplishment, and one that continued for several years and marked his legacy, was the fact that he rearranged and changed the way parties were organized in the government. El Partido de la Revolución Mexicana (or the PRM), consisted of four different sectors, now built to suit the needs of all within the government: the peasant union, organized labor, the popular sector and the army. These four sectors made up the party that lasted for seventy years: lasting from 1929, to 2000, it held uninterrupted power until the election of Vicente Fox (Hammet 291).

In a way going forward, the Cardenas reforms that took place in the 1930s were an excellent way to display the return of the Revolution in full circle. To put in Morton's words, the Cardenas reforms had returned the revolutionary logic of the revolution and contributed to the progressing social change (Morton 26). This brought in the era that supported the people through structural reforms, repression and cooptation that enforced and brought growth onto later periods such as the 1940s and 50s, it could all be traced back to the 1930s and the changes made to accommodate for the people (Morton 27). If one was to look at the progress Mexico had made to the unruly, nearly warring period of the first phase of the Mexican Revolution, one would assume that the uneven path that Mexico had trodden upon several times had been vanquished, and now, they were working and building towards a new and stable era. While that was mainly true for most periods in Mexico, and the PRM (later known as the PRI at the beginning of 1946), there were some various slip-ups that showed that the road they had thought they left behind did not truly leave them. Though the work during these two parts of the Mexican Revolution influenced and pushed the country as a whole to enter an international stage, there were still many flaws that trace back and reveal the cracks that exist in the Mexican government as a whole.

As stated prior, the road going forward was ruled by a single party that effectively had presidential sovereignty up until the 2000s—the PRI (Hammet 291). By the late 1950s, there were issues that were taking place involving

various behind the scenes manipulations, and often made it look like the political scene was being bent to the advantage of the PRI. Corruption, although minor, was still a frequent part of the government despite its changes. This could be seen with the allegations thrown at the Lopez Mateos administration, who was accused of electoral gerrymandering and machine-politics (Morton 27). Another example of where the PRI had succumbed to a negative image and showed its corruptive side, was the massacre of 1968, where a massive group of students had been protesting against the violence used by the government (Hammet 260). It was shown that the government didn't attempt to dialogue at all, and went in to occupy the hotbed of where the movement took place (National Preparatory School), and then further massacred both civilians and protesters on October 2nd in front of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Hammet 260). To make matters worse, there was plenty of international coverage that had its eye on the situation, and witnessed the entirety of the spectacle that was the Tlletelolco Massacre (Hammet 260). The PRI's support was already dwindling by that point, but it further lost the support it had between the people and the government. It appeared that the corruption and poor choices made by the government were undoing the bonds and closeness that were built nearly thirty years ago.

The biggest incident of all that occurred that further shows the works of a governmental party that followed in the footsteps of its predecessors, was the earthquake of Mexico City in September 1985. With an immeasurable number of deaths that is still unable to be discovered to this day, Mexico's government did not wish to have any foreign interference with the earthquake (Hammet 271). Rather, they did not react at all to the initial crisis, and when they did, it was extremely slow and used it to avoid public backlash from outside forces. Though Mexico was able to obtain a loan (\$500 million USD) from the World Bank, and able to contribute funds to help mend the destruction that the Earthquake had caused, this caused Mexico to be in debt towards the United States at this time (Hammet 271).

The Uneven Path is something that can be seen as a cycle of violence, overthrows and corruption that lasted for several years. It is what started the Mexican Revolution, and it was the promises to clean up those acts that caused several reforms from the 1920s to the 1940s. It is how most political actions and movements were seen from various spots of the newly reformed Mexican Government, built upon corruption, abuse of power and the ignorance of the citizens below them. But the Mexican Revolution was also a way to ease the path as well; the agrarian reforms that occurred during the 1930s to 40s, as well as aiming to ease the people during the times of conflict and try to bring the revolutionary goals back full circle, can be seen as a positive net gain as to how Mexico has changed from its corrupt ways. When one circles everything back

to the Revolution, it is apparent that it was the desire to change, and the ideas that propagated that change really pushed the government to do better and fix its wrongs. Even though the initial process of La Revolución might seem passive, and the results can be seen as a messy and challenged process across the period from 1910 to 1940, the end result showed that the path it walked became essential for the government to survive in a modern day era. It is an extremely contradictory way of building and reforming a nation from the ground up, as all uneven paths often have, they have their ups and downs.

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