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Ciudadanos: Constructing the nation at the margin of the state in Venezuela, Colombia, and Mexico, 1846-1870

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Ciudadanos: Constructing the nation at the margin of the state in Venezuela, Colombia, and Mexico, 1846-1870

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In January 1850, members of the Democratic Society of Cali, a provincial capital in southern Colombia, paraded through the streets to the tune of the Marseillaise.¹ The society marched in support of the liberal government that had taken power the previous year, which had awoken the wrath of the conservative oligarchs. The men of the society, from poor, plebeian backgrounds, did not see their struggle as simply a footnote in the larger history of transatlantic revolution. Rather, they represented another generation of patriots, marching in defense of their patria to another Valmy.² In the decades after the wars of independence, amidst the revolutions

¹ James E Sanders, *The Vanguard of the Atlantic World: Creating Modernity, Nation, and Democracy in Nineteenth-century Latin America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 154.

² Valmy was one of the first battles of the French Revolutionary Wars, during which the Marseillaise made its debut on the world stage.

and civil wars, Colombia's artisans and peasants came to claim the Marseillaise, and the revolutionary ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity that it represented, as their own. Carrying forward their own red, blue, and yellow tricolor, Cali's plebeians, in rallying to defense of their nation, were fundamentally reshaping it.³ However, they were not doing so in isolation. Ramón Mercado, the provincial governor and a passionate revolutionary, played a leading role in organizing the province's poor masses, promising them social and political liberty in exchange for their support for the liberal cause. This bargain, struck between plebeians and a middle-class lawyer, provided not just the impetus that drove the Democratic Society onto the streets in January 1850, but also the foundation for the Colombian nation.

Colombians were not alone in their efforts to reshape the post-independence Latin American nation. By 1850 Mexican and Venezuelan plebeians were also engaged in social and political struggles to win autonomy and freedom from both aristocratic hacendados and conservative dictators. Just as Colombia's plebeians found political strength and influence through an alliance with the radical lawyer Ramón Mercado, in Venezuela the provincial merchant Ezequiel Zamora played a leading role in the revolt of the landless workers and peasants of the southern plains, while in Mexico the liberal general Juan Álvarez led the indigenous communities of Guerrero against both foreign invasion and the centralist state. Each of these men, rather than filling the role of the stereotypical "caudillo," relied for support not on patron-client networks or charisma alone, but on his ability to articulate the rural poor's demands for inclusion as *ciudadanos* of the nation. Mercado and Álvarez went even further, incorporating not just plebeians' political demands into their programs, but their social demands as well:

³ Throughout this study, the word plebeian is used to refer to the mass of artisans, peasants, smallholders, farm-workers, and wage laborers who made up the rural poor in each country. This term has been selected to emphasize the heterogenous class structure of the movements alongside their association with the common people.

calling for an end to the oligarchy's oppression of peasants and workers. Zamora, Mercado, and Álvarez all thus played a vital role as mediators, using their positions in national liberal parties to bring the rhetoric and practice of plebeian nationalism onto the national stage, where it fundamentally reshaped almost every aspect of postcolonial Latin American society.

In order to analyze the political and social impact of each of these mediators, this study begins with a brief survey of recent scholarship of post-independence Latin America, contrasting the prevailing view that the region was dominated by caudillos with new studies that have highlighted the ideological and social bases of post-independence conflict. This historiographical survey is followed by an analysis of the effects of the Wars of Independence on the political consciousness of Latin American plebeians. I also explore the intellectual roots of Latin American liberalism and the beginning of state formation. Following this exploration, the study will turn to Ezequiel Zamora, and his efforts to raise rural peasants and artisans in revolt against the Venezuelan government in 1846, emphasizing the importance of the discourse of citizenship in post-colonial Latin America. From Venezuela I will proceed to Ramón Mercado's efforts to build the Democratic Society of Cali and the heightening tensions between liberals and conservatives that ultimately exploded into civil war in 1851. The study of Mercado will focus particularly on the relationships between nationalist rhetoric, political democracy, and social revolution. Finally, the paper will conclude with the struggle of Juan Álvarez and the peasants of southern Mexico in defense of the federal system. In particular, the case study will deal with the centrality of demands for local autonomy in liberal nationalist programs, and their ramifications on both *La Reforma* and the future development of the Mexican state and nation.

A brief note on terminology—until 1863, the modern nation of Colombia was known as New Granada (*Nueva Granada*) and Colombians referred to themselves as “Granadans”

(*Granadinos*). For the sake of simplicity, this paper will use the modern terminology, however various quotations may use the historic terms.

A note on translation—except in the cases of those documents deriving from *The Mexico Reader*, *The Bolívarian Revolution*, and *Latin American Independence: An Anthology of Sources*, all translations of primary sources were made by the author. My deepest gratitude goes to Javier Raúl García de Alarcon for his advice at various stages of the translation process. Ultimately, however, all translations are my own responsibility.

Changing Perspectives on the 19th Century

For much of the 19th and 20th centuries, narratives of the conflicts and struggles that marked mid-19th century Latin America focused on the “caudillos.” The caudillo, seen by the historian as the heir to the multitude of fractious generals in the independence wars, fought out of greed and a personal desire for power. As Peter Guardino notes, the shadow of Antonio López de Santa Anna has been particularly long, his political opportunism and ambition providing the archetypal caudillo both for contemporaries and later historians.⁴ Guillermo Morón, in his history of Venezuela, provides another example of the traditional caudillo narrative. Antonio Guzmán Blanco, a contemporary liberal leader states that “...Venezuelans... don’t even know what [federation] means. The idea of federation came from me and some others... ‘since every revolution has to have a slogan...for if our opponents... had said *federation*, we should have said *centralism!*’”⁵

⁴ Peter Guardino, *The Dead March: A History of the Mexican-American War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), 17.

⁵ Guillermo Morón, *A History of Venezuela* (London: G. Allen & Unwin, 1964), 168.

Besides reinforcing the traditional image of the ambitious caudillo, the preceding quotation reveals another aspect of the caudillo narrative – the unthinking masses. The plebeian peasants, artisans, and laborers that formed the armies led by these caudillos have no agency, and no demands of their own. In Guzmán Blanco’s view, they cannot even understand what they are fighting for! Deprived of any ideological or mass dimensions, the civil conflicts of Latin America are seen largely as various leaders fighting for personal power. This being the case, Latin America in this period was assigned by historians a largely parochial role in the greater scheme of world history. As James Sanders has pointed out, in Eric Hobsbawm’s world map of republicanism in 1847, South America is obscured by an inset of Europe.⁶ Historians have generally not thought it possible that events like the Federal War in Venezuela or the Colombian Civil War of 1851 could compare to such watershed moments as the US Civil War or the Revolutions of 1848.

While the traditional caudillo narrative is not as dominant today as it was in the preceding century, aspects of it live on in the pessimistic take of some scholars on Latin American nation-states. In *Blood and Debt*, Miguel Angel Centeno applied the bellicist model of state formation to Latin America, to prove that the European experience, in terms of the development of coherent nation states, is the historical exception. Inherent to this argument is the assumption that the Latin American experience demonstrates that “the formation of nation-states is not inevitable.”⁷ According to Centeno, conflicts in Latin America, rather than building the nation, tore it apart. For example, the great ideological civil wars of Colombian history, rather than creating stronger nations or states, “became so institutionalized that competition between parties

⁶ Sanders, *The Vanguard of the Atlantic World*, 10.

⁷ Miguel Angel Centeno, *Blood and Debt: War and the Nation-state in Latin America* (University Park (PA): Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002), 275.

and their adherents became more important than the original points of dispute.”⁸ Again, political conflict in 19th century Latin America is seen through a factionalist rather than ideological light. Further, Centeno contends that due to ethnic and regionalist divisions, conflicts in 19th century Latin America were characterized by groups opting out of, rather than into, the nation.⁹ The faction and caste ridden Latin America of the 19th, and even 20th centuries, could not produce nations.

The methodology Centeno uses to arrive at the above conclusions is somewhat flawed, however. Despite Centeno’s argument being that the Latin American experience of nation-state formation proves the European to be the exception rather than the rule, his conclusions about the nation in Latin America are based upon his application of the European derived bellicist model to Latin America. Demonstrative of this contradiction, in his effort to determine the strength of Latin American nationalist myths, Centeno analyzes the stamps, street names, and statues of Latin American countries for military nationalist themes, even though, as Centeno himself often notes, interstate war is comparatively rare in Latin America.¹⁰ Concluding that wars, particularly interstate wars, did not in Latin America create the same impulse towards nationhood as they did in Europe, Centeno largely does not contemplate whether Latin America ever produced any original mode of nation-building.

Recently, Latin America’s supposed lack of popular politics has been challenged by the application of subaltern studies to Latin America. These national histories focus on the role that plebeians played in 19th politics, and their contributions to national development. One of the first such studies was *Peasants, Politics, and the Formation of Mexico’s National State* by Peter

⁸ Ibid., 63.

⁹ Ibid., 150.

¹⁰Ibid., 183-194.

Guardino. Guardino chronicles the struggle of mulatto sharecroppers and indigenous peasants in Guerrero throughout the independence and early republican eras, alongside elite figures like Juan Álvarez, for citizenship and autonomy.¹¹ Rather than seeing the 19th century as solely defined by struggles between elites, Guardino focuses on how elite and plebian politics were intertwined. Indeed, such monumental changes as independence and the formation of a new national state would have deep impacts on plebeians, and plebeians would formulate their own responses.¹² These responses would have a deep impact on the development of the Mexican state, demonstrating to the Mexican elite that “even an authoritarian state had to be inclusive.”¹³ The supposedly ignorant plebian classes, rather than being marginal to 19th century politics, were integral to them.

Aside from the impact of plebian politics, Guardino makes several interesting observations about their form. Popular liberalism and federalism persisted, despite an often-hostile central government, because they were strongest at the periphery of the state.¹⁴ Distance from the centers of elite power gave plebeians a greater space within which to organize and develop their own political programs and organizations. Guardino also notes how, while plebeians were major political actors, the inability of any one social group to obtain complete hegemony ensured that popular liberalism and rural politics would be characterized by cross-class coalitions.¹⁵ Plebeians provided sympathetic local elites, like Juan Álvarez, with the

¹¹ Peter F. Guardino, *Peasants, Politics and the Formation of Mexico's National State: Guerrero, 1800-1857*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996), 217.

¹² *Ibid.*, 212.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 219.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 218.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 214-215.

manpower and support necessary to compete in national political struggle, while elites could offer plebeians the incorporation of some of their demands into programs and policies.

Similar themes emerge out of James Sanders's history of 19th century Colombia, *Contentious Republicans*. Sanders's book explores his theory that politics in Colombia were defined by "republican bargaining" between elites and plebeians. Beginning with the election of 1848, the Colombian Liberal Party increasingly began to make direct appeals to the rural poor, promising not only vague ideals like equality, but also concrete policies, such as the abolition of slavery, the end of monopolies, and even the protection of peasant common lands, the ejidos.¹⁶ The alliance forged by bargaining became vital to the Liberal Party's fortunes, as the military and political support of plebeians would be decisive to their victories in the civil wars that dominated the country from the mid to late 19th centuries.¹⁷ Bargaining, then, not only ensured the incorporation of plebeians, and their demands, into Colombia's national political arena, it also formed the basis of a multiclass liberal movement strong enough to fend off repeated conservative challenges.

The basic unit of republican bargaining was the Democratic Society, a series of political clubs set up by liberals around the country during the election of 1848. These clubs were open to all men, and thus provided a space where elite and middling liberals could converse and develop a common program with their plebeian counterparts.¹⁸ These clubs also provided largely unrepresented and illiterate Afro-Colombian peasants and artisans the chance to advocate their own fiery brand of popular liberalism, which called for the social and political equality of all

¹⁶ James E Sanders, *Contentious Republicans: Popular Politics, Race, and Class in Nineteenth-century Colombia* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 70.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 59.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 66-69.

under an inclusive banner of citizenship.¹⁹ Similar to what Guardino observed in Guerrero, inter-class alliances and plebian political organization allowed plebeians to play a vital and independent role in Colombian politics.

Subaltern studies' methodologies have also been applied to countries that usually receive little attention in broader surveys. In *Ambitious Rebels*, Reuben Zahler describes the profound changes in Venezuelan society throughout the late colonial and early republican periods. Particularly, Zahler notes how, amid an economic crisis in the 1840s, the Venezuelan Liberal Party for the first time designed a platform aimed at winning mass support. The result of this was, that, when the Conservative Party committed election fraud in 1846, plebeian classes "rebelled to support 'their' party."²⁰ In Venezuela as well, multiclass coalitions were an integral aspect of politics. Rural liberal elites, such as Ezequiel Zamora, led the plebeians during the rebellion.²¹ In Venezuela, just as in Mexico and Colombia, the need of liberal elites for political support combined with plebeians' political aspirations ensured that politics would develop a popular character.

The subaltern studies have constituted a significant reevaluation of 19th century politics in Latin America. Rather than viewing the plebeian masses of Latin American counties as ignorant of, or uninterested in, politics, they highlight the significant contributions plebeians made to the developments of states and ideologies. They replace the image of the military caudillo, who relies on patronage and conscription to gain support, with that of the liberal lawyer, party official, or local notable, who promises reform and new rights in return for plebeian support.

¹⁹ Ibid., 47.

²⁰ Reuben Zahler, *Ambitious Rebels: Remaking Honor, Law, and Liberalism in Venezuela, 1780-1850* (Tucson, Arizona: University of Arizona Press, 2013), 224-225.

²¹ Ibid., 225.

Latin American politics in the 19th century can now safely be said to have been characterized by plebeian assertiveness and multi-class coalitions, rather than pure caudillismo and elite struggles. Through these discoveries, they have revealed the importance of analyzing more closely political developments at the margins of nations, both in a geographical and social sense.

At the same time, one drawback of the subaltern studies approach in Latin America is that it has focused far more on the state than on the nation. While outlining in great detail the contributions of plebeians to the state, they have had less to say on how plebeians may have had an influence on the development of nationhood in their respective countries. While Sanders does note that plebeians' participation in democratizing projects resulted in a greater feeling of nationhood among them, the primary focus is on that democratizing effort, rather than the national project.²² The exact process of how plebeians and liberal elites could together construct nations out of the caste ridden colonial order remains to be examined.

The subaltern studies have, however, helped form the basis of a new line of transnational histories that challenge the supposed marginality of Latin America. This new scholarship is exemplified by James Sanders's *The Vanguard of the Atlantic World*, which describes how Latin Americans saw themselves as at the center of world progress. While a great deal of previous scholarship has been based on the writing and ideas of *letrado* elites, Sanders points out that when the historian begins to focus on "everyday political thought and discourse," our image of 19th century Latin America changes significantly. Rather than the story being one of exasperated elites complaining of how poorly their countries compared to "European civilization," it is one of an active plebeian political culture, where artisans and peasants gathered in taverns to hear the

²² Sanders, *Contentious Republicans*, 197-198.

latest news and speeches.²³ Not only did Latin American's not see themselves as inferior to Europe, they redefined the basis of modernity itself. Sanders describes this unique conception of modernity as *American Republican Modernity*, which contended that political inclusion and social progress, rather than industrial capitalism, were the core of modernity. This view of modernity placed the Americas at the core, and Europe as "...desperately reacting to the events in...the Americas."²⁴

In *Vanguard*, Sanders also makes an interesting observation about the relationship between nations and states in Latin America. While traditional European derived theory argues that the state is the maker of nation and nationalism, in Latin America, notions of nationhood developed independently of, and became more powerful than, the state. It was plebeians, rather than elites that were most influential in the development of the nation.²⁵ Ultimately, this populist notion of the nation collapsed because of elites' efforts to strengthen the state and reestablish the social order. The Latin American nation, by promoting an active, assertive, and unruly plebeian class, was not a base upon which modern capitalism could develop. As such, in Mexico through the *Porfiriato*, and in Colombia through the *Regeneración*, elites strengthened the state so that it could discipline plebeians, all at the expense of the nation.²⁶ Modern capitalism and the powerful states that accompanied it ultimately destroyed the democratic, plebeian conception of nationhood.

One of the most recent (and perhaps unique) additions to the historiography of 19th century Latin America is Michel Gobat's *Empire by Invitation*, about the William Walker

²³ Sanders, *The Vanguard of the Atlantic World*, 13-14.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 16.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 18.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 213-214.

expedition in Nicaragua. Despite the traditional narrative of the conflict being one of the villainous *yanqui* imperialist and the helpless Nicaraguan victim, Gobat illustrates how Walker's project to construct a Jeffersonian "Empire of Liberty" in Nicaragua had significant local support. This support came particularly from Nicaragua's plebeian classes, and from peasant radicals such as José María Valle, who urged Walker to emancipate the local poor from the power of the aristocracy.²⁷ Walker's surprising local support was seen across Central America, where the military response of both El Salvador and Guatemala's governments was slowed by the support of each country's liberal party for Walker. Even during the war, "pro-Walker slogans mysteriously appeared on the walls of several Guatemalan towns."²⁸ Gobat's research helps reveal that, while events like the Walker expedition have been used to argue that Latin American was simply the plaything of imperial powers, in reality, it had its own agency. Walker's enterprise relied on the support of the Central American masses, and when it lost that support, it collapsed.²⁹

The last few years have thus seen a significant reevaluation of 19th century Latin America's place in the greater world. It is increasingly becoming clear that contrary to the ideas of writers like Centeno, 19th century Latin America had strong and vital nations, constructed not by the state or war, but by the democratizing force of insurgent plebeians. However, while this fact has been recognized, the origins and processes that underlie it have not yet been studied in their full depth. That the nation existed there is no doubt, but how the nationalism that forged it was able to capture the minds of so many plebeians without state-backing must still be

²⁷ Michel Gobat, *Empire by Invitation William Walker and Manifest Destiny in Central America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018), 9-10.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 254.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 284-285.

addressed. Indeed, how plebeians, who had for generations been subjected to an ethnic and social caste system, became the vanguard of national movements is a vastly important question not just for the study of Latin America, but for the study of nationalism in general. This paper addresses the question of plebeian nationalism by following the example of the subaltern studies' methodology, through looking at the nation-building efforts of radical liberals, both plebeian and elite, which thrived at the margins of the state.

From Independence to Statehood

Early republican Latin America was shaped by the intersection between its unique situation and the general trends of the Age of Revolution. The French Revolution in particular had a deep impact on the independence movements. As early as 1794 in New Granada, the patriotic Bogotano Antonio Nariño awoke the ire of Spanish authorities by translating *The Declaration of the Rights of Man* into Spanish. Not long after, an independence-minded conspiracy in Venezuela produced a "Canción Americana," with lyrics that referred to "the sovereign people," a clear reference to the French Revolution's *peuple souverain*.³⁰ In Mexico, José María Morelos's "Sentiments of the Nation" also incorporated references to the sovereign people.³¹ While in France the revolutionary and Rousseauian ideology of the Jacobins was forced underground by Thermidor and Brumaire, it would find a new space within which to grow in Latin America.

One of the most influential ideas to take root in Latin America was that of the citizen. Similar to revolutionary France, revolutionary Latin America had a strong culture of patriotic

³⁰ Sarah C. Chambers, and John Charles Chasteen, *Latin American Independence: An Anthology of Sources* (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub., 2010), 58-59.

³¹ Gilbert M. Joseph, and Timothy J. Henderson. *The Mexico Reader History, Culture, Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 189-190.

citizenship. Simón Bolívar exemplifies this culture with his 1819 remarks to the Congress of Angostura that he preferred the title of “good citizen... to that of *liberator*, bestowed... by Venezuela, to that of *perfecter* bestowed by Cundinamarca, and to all others the universe could confer.”³² Bolívar highlights how, for the republican, the title of citizen should be their greatest aspiration, rather than military glory, as represented by “liberator,” or political power, as represented by “perfecter.” Just as in France, the idea that society ought to be composed of coequal citizens was influential in Latin America’s revolutions.

However, while Latin American revolutionaries may have adopted many of the ideas of the French revolution, it is vital to note that this was not mere imitation. Ideas like citizenship, to be made truly applicable in a Latin American context very different from that of Europe, had to be rethought. As John Chasteen notes, the concept of citizenship was broader in Latin America than it was in the United States or Europe, as it embraced not only the creole population, but also those of African, indigenous, and mixed descent.³³ While these ideals were often not realized in practice, the fact that from the beginning, citizenship was theoretically open to all, fundamentally altered the nature of what it meant to be a citizen in Latin America. The *ciudadanos* of the Latin American republics were unique participants and products of the Age of Revolution, just as were the citizens of the United States, and the citoyens of France and Haiti.

The Latin American notion of citizenship was fundamentally shaped by the exigencies of the wars of independence. In his 1816 *Decree for the Emancipation of the Slaves*, Simón Bolívar declared that “...the slaves who have groaned under the Spanish yoke during the three previous centuries” were now citizens. Interestingly, Bolívar identifies the social injustice of slavery

³² Simón Bolívar, and Hugo Chávez Frías, *The Bolivarian Revolution* (London: Verso, 2009), 79.

³³ John Charles Chasteen, *Americanos: Latin Americas Struggle for Independence* (New York: Oxford University Press), 2-3.

entirely with the enemy of independence, Spain. At the same time, Bolívar also declared that since “the Republic needs the service of all her children,” only those slaves who joined the patriot army would be free. By joining the army, slaves, along with their families became *ciudadanos*. However, if they failed to do so, they remained in servitude.³⁴ Bolívar, in need of military support to continue his campaign, broke down racial and economic barriers to citizenship by declaring that even a recently freed slave could be a *ciudadano*. At the same time, he erected a new qualification – only the man who was willing to take up arms in defense of his patria could truly be a *ciudadano*. It was patriotism that distinguished the *ciudadano* from the subject. Bolívar’s decree thus is an early example of an elite bargaining with plebeians, offering them a chance to achieve legal equality, but only in return for their patriotic commitment to the national cause.

Similar rhetoric appears in Bolívar’s 1820 *Decree on Indian Labor*. Given less than a year after the liberation of Colombia at the battle of Boyacá, the decree sought to end the extraction of unpaid labor from indigenous peoples. However, most interesting is Bolívar’s order that local officials inform indigenous peoples of the decree directly, and to urge them to “... demand their rights even though it be against the judges themselves...”³⁵ Amidst his efforts to establish a new administration in recently liberated territory, Bolívar encourages plebeians to challenge the authority of local officials perceived as violating their rights. In so doing, he attempted to demonstrate to plebeians that their new status and rights as *ciudadanos* had concrete benefits for them, as they now were able to challenge the power of colonial institutions that had long oppressed them. The decree also invokes a highly egalitarian spirit, asserting that even poor

³⁴ Bolívar, and Chávez Frías, *The Bolivarian Revolution*, 65-66.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 119-120.

indigenous peoples now had the right to challenge the unjust actions of the powerful, like judges. Some liberal *letrados* explicitly encouraged plebeians to think of themselves as rights-bearing citizens entitled to autonomy and dignity.

The speeches of *letrados* like Bolívar, however, do not represent the actual extent of political and social change brought on by independence. Many of the promises Bolívar made, particularly those concerning slavery, would later go on to be broken. However, what Bolívar's speeches do demonstrate, is the discursive power of citizenship in early republican Latin America. Bolívar specifically chose to appeal to slaves and indigenous peoples by offering not just freedom or the end of the tribute, but the status of *ciudadano* as well. Despite the fact that in 1816 there was no extant republic, Bolívar recognized that the offer of a place in it was still an extremely powerful way of convincing plebeians that independence was worth fighting for. From an early stage, some *letrados* were beginning to understand the importance of the citizenship to plebeians.

Bolívar was by no means unique in promising that independence would give plebeians a place in the republic. Indeed, the Venezuelan Congress paid patriot soldiers in bonds redeemable for land.³⁶ The plebeian soldier, having already been identified as a citizen, was now also promised the land that would give him economic independence. Equally, the laws around citizenship were colorblind, and the constitution guaranteed racial equality, reinforcing Bolívar's promise that slaves could become citizens.³⁷ Nor were these developments confined to South America. In Mexico, the application of the Spanish Constitution of 1812 by the trigarantine army meant the abolition of caste distinctions and indigenous tribute.³⁸ Across Latin America,

³⁶ Zahler, *Ambitious Rebels*, 220.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 46.

³⁸ Guardino, *Peasants, Politics and the Formation of Mexico's National State*, 76.

plebeians were told that citizenship was not simply a vague promise, rather, it signified greater national inclusion and economic independence. The decisive nature of plebeian participation in the wars of independence forced elites to alter what it would mean to be a *ciudadano*.

Notions of citizenship would not be solely crafted by *letrado* elites, however. Plebeians would play a direct role in reshaping them throughout the early republican period. Even as independence was only just achieved in Mexico, a group of female slaves wrote to Agustín de Iturbide, demanding their freedom on the basis “that all the inhabitants of this America are Citizens.”³⁹ Plebeians challenged elites to live up to their high-minded ideals. Elite’s legal chicanery over who exactly was included or excluded in their promises of equality were irrelevant to plebeians who realized that their conditions did not match the rhetoric. In the 1830s and 40s, when centralist constitutions denied peasants citizenship, indigenous peasants continued to describe themselves as *ciudadanos* in defiance.⁴⁰ For plebeians, regardless of what a constitution drafted in a far-off capital said, the fact that they were actively involved in, and affected by, politics, made them citizens. Increasingly, traditional elite notions of what constituted citizenship lost all currency among plebeians.

Indeed, the rights of citizenship were invoked by plebeians in ways that none of the drafters of those rights likely anticipated. In southern Colombia, the residents of Cali protested in an 1849 petition that liquor monopolies violated their rights as citizens. Just as in Mexico, plebeians invoked the right of citizenship even though it was legally denied to them.⁴¹ Further, Cali’s plebeians associated citizenship with not just political, but social rights as well. Taxes on liquor production, by impeding plebeian’s livelihoods, were an affront to equality and freedom,

³⁹ Sanders, *The Vanguard of the Atlantic World*, 18.

⁴⁰ Guardino, *Peasants, Politics and the Formation of Mexico’s National State*, 163.

⁴¹ Sanders, *Contentious Republicans*, 46.

the values which the new nations claimed to be based upon. Citizenship was reshaped by plebeians so that it supported their claims to social equality and economic independence.⁴²

Autonomy was an extremely important aspect of plebeian conceptions of citizenship. The idea of social equality, that poor people did not inherently owe respect or deference to the wealthy was powerful in southern Colombia, for example. This social independence was also fundamentally tied to economic independence, and land in particular.⁴³ In Mexico, Colombia, and Venezuela, the hacienda system of agriculture was powerful in the countryside. Without land, plebeians would be forced to labor under the authority of a hacendado and rely on their wage and patronage for their survival. This of course compromised the social and political independence of the plebeian. However, if a plebeian had land of his own, they became the master of their own fate. As such, the importance of economic independence in plebeian notions of citizenships was also bound with a need to access land without having to defer to another, wealthier, man.

The importance of land to plebeians is seen most clearly in the discourse of indigenous *ciudadanos* on their resguardos. These resguardos were parcels of lands owned and farmed communally by indigenous peoples. Throughout the early republican period, the resguardos increasingly came under attack by liberals, who argued that they were economically and socially backwards, and that they should be replaced with individual private property, to the objections of indigenous peoples.⁴⁴ Appealing for aid in a land dispute, the residents of Caldono appealed to the governor on the basis of the protection he was supposed to offer *ciudadanos*, and argued they were “worthy of a better fate [than being dispossessed of their lands] owing to the simple fact of

⁴² Ibid., 47.

⁴³ Ibid., 47-48.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 33.

belonging to the great Granadan family.”⁴⁵ Indigenous peoples asserted that the identity of *indio* and *ciudadano* were not in conflict, and indeed that being *ciudadanos* entitled them to protection against the usurpation of their lands. Further, the social and economic dimensions plebeians attached to citizenship again emerge, as it is invoked defend their *resguardos*, and thus their economic independence. Despite their communities being viewed as feudal relics, indigenous plebeians defended their *resguardos* using the same revolutionary language of rights and citizenship as liberals used to argue for their dissolution.

Perhaps the most radical invocations of citizenship came not from *ciudadanos*, but from *ciudadanas*. Despite being legally excluded from citizenship, women were quick to incorporate the new ideas into their discourse. Indeed, across Latin America, women had been active participants in the wars of independence, and thus felt they too had a claim on the new nations and the rights that accompanied them. In 1824, women in Zacatecas even petitioned for full citizenship.⁴⁶ While of course this petition was not granted, and no post-independence Latin American country granted women citizenship, women asserted its rights anyway. As Reuben Zahler notes, as early as the 1830s Venezuelan women suing for alimony in court began base their arguments around appeals to citizenship and rights.⁴⁷ Women, thus, also began to adopt the identity of *ciudadana* in their efforts to gain equality.

Throughout Latin America, the Wars of Independence had given rise to a strong patriotic culture of citizenship. While this culture may have first emerged in the rhetoric of patriotic *letrados*, plebeians increasingly began to adopt the title of *ciudadano*, and use it to advance their own goals. This development would be vital for the later emergence of liberal and nationalist

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁴⁶ Zahler, *Ambitious Rebels*, 175.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 183.

movements in the 19th century. The extreme heterogeneity of Latin American states had the potential to frustrate any attempt to forge a common national identity. However, the identity of *ciudadano* provided diverse groups of people with the foundations of a shared identity. Indeed, as noted above, by the 1850s some plebeians were already beginning to identify themselves as members of a national family. This new patriotic citizenship thus bears a great deal of similarity to the revolutionary-popular patriotism produced by the French Revolution, which saw the nation as formed by the political choice of its members to try "...to renew it by reform or revolution."⁴⁸ Thus, the process by which old caste and corporate identities were superseded by national ones was well under way by mid-century.

Interestingly, however, this culture of patriotic citizenship was as much a product of the lack of revolutionary change as its presence. After independence, governments increasingly tried to shut plebeians out of the political sphere. As noted above, plebeian's adoption of the discourse of citizenship throughout the 1830s and 40s was often in response to constitutional restrictions that excluded them from citizenship based on wealth or land ownership. As such, plebeian patriotism constituted a challenge to, rather than support of, the state. Further, the social and economic dimensions that plebeians identified in citizenship ultimately brought them into conflict with elites, both liberal and conservative. For example, in 1853, one Colombian plebeian asserted his right to collect wood on private property on the basis of "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity."⁴⁹ After the Wars of Independence plebeian and elite notions of citizenship began to diverge to the point the plebeian *ciudadano* could be construed as a revolutionary challenge to the status quo.

⁴⁸ E. J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge University Press, 1992), 87.

⁴⁹ Sanders, *Contentious Republicans*, 49.

The increasing radicalism of patriotic plebeian *ciudadanos* thus coincided with an increasingly conservative turn in their states. In Mexico, the turn to centralism meant not only the loss of citizenship for plebeians, but also restrictions on local autonomy. States were replaced with departments, which granted the conservative national government the ability to appoint governors. New regulations also significantly reduced the number of self-regulating municipalities, leading to the wide-spread replacement of elected town councils with appointed justices of the peace. Further the tax burden on plebeians was significantly increased, exceeding the colonial tribute level.⁵⁰ Throughout the 1830s and 40s in Mexico, conservative centralist political projects challenged the ability of plebeians to rule themselves as *ciudadanos*.

In Colombia, a similar conservative project challenged the autonomy and dignity of plebeians. Particularly in southern Colombia, the Cauca, the dominance of haciendas both politically and economically forced plebeians into subservience to the wealthy.⁵¹ Aforementioned monopolies on aguardiente production, along with tobacco monopolies, were particularly harmful to the poor. Indeed, the whole system of taxation, relying mostly on consumption taxes, disproportionately burdened the poor.⁵² Particularly explosive in the Cauca was the continuation of African slavery, and interference with the right of the poor to access the public common lands, the ejidos. The latter issue had intensified with independence, as hacendados increasingly attempted to fence off sections of the ejidos in order to annex them to their property. Further, up until 1849, politics, both nationally and in the Cauca, was dominated by the Conservative Party.⁵³ Thus, the political domination of conservatives went hand in hand

⁵⁰ Guardino, *Peasants, Politics and the Formation of Mexico's National State*, 100-103.

⁵¹ Sanders, *Contentious Republicans*, 15.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 73.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 65.

with the increasingly heavy economic and social burdens being placed upon plebeians in the Cauca.

The situation in Venezuela was similar. Independence era armies had relied especially on the llaneros, the rural poor of the southern Venezuelan plains, the llanos. While, as noted above, these soldiers had been promised land, as a result of fraud and exchanges most of the vouchers wound up in the hands of the officers, and land increasingly became concentrated in the hands of the wealthy. Further, the llaneros often did not have deeds to the lands they still worked, and as a result the government was able to sell many of these parcels off to large landowners. Finally, the government led by *letrados* like Bolívar who were concerned that the rural poor were lazy, began to implement jornalero laws that forced the landless poor to work for a hacendado or face arrest as a vagabond.⁵⁴ This sustained attack on the autonomy of plebeians further coincided with an economic downturn caused by a drop in coffee prices and exacerbated by liberalized credit laws.⁵⁵ The conservative turn of the government and international economic fluctuations combined to deny poor llaneros the place in the nation that they had been promised and had fought for.

This conservative turn in government was met by an increasingly tenacious liberal response, both from plebeians and their middle-class counterparts. Interestingly, across Venezuela, Mexico, and Colombia, liberals had a similar vocabulary for the conservative states. When a group of liberal societies formed in the western regions of the Venezuelan Llanos, their motto was “Popular election, alternative principle, order and horror to the oligarchy.”⁵⁶ A few

⁵⁴ Zahler, *Ambitious Rebels*, 220-221.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 188-191.

⁵⁶ Damarys Cordero Negrin, *Ezequiel Zamora: "General del pueblo soberano"* (Caracas: Ediciones de la presidencia de la República, 2004), 79.

years later, when the young Colombian liberal lawyer Ramón Mercado took up a position in the Cauca region, he found a society divided between oligarchs and the “despised masses.”⁵⁷ In Mexico, peasants referred to centralists as chaquetas and gauchupines, derisive names for royalists during the wars of independence.⁵⁸ While traditional analysis of post-independence conflicts in Latin America may focus on personalities or political programs, actual participants saw them in a different light. Conservative governments were seen as oligarchies that wanted only the wealthy and powerful to be citizens and were often identified with the Spanish empire. Meanwhile, they were opposed by a *pueblo irredento*, the rebellious and patriotic plebeian *ciudadanos* who demanded they be recognized as part of the nation. The stage was set for a post-colonial reckoning over who the nation ought to represent.

Ezequiel Zamora and “Horror to the Oligarchy!”

In Venezuela, it was the events surrounding the election of 1846 that brought simmering plebeian discontent to a boil. Throughout the late 1830s and early 1840s, conservatives José Antonio Páez and Carlos Soublette had simply alternated presidential terms. However, in 1846, the conservatives ran a new candidate, José Tadeo Monagas. In response, the liberals put forward Antonio Leocadio Gúzman, a liberal intellectual who had obtained fame after being tried and acquitted on charges of sedition the prior year. While Gúzman lost the presidential election, the liberals did win municipal elections in the capital Caracas. In response, the Soublette administration annulled the results, causing a political crisis. The liberals across the country were outraged, but the national leadership refused to endorse an uprising. Gúzman and Páez arranged

⁵⁷ Ramón Mercado, *Memorias sobre los acontecimientos del sur de la Nueva Granada: Durante la administración del 7 de marzo de 1849* (Bogotá: Imprenta Imparcial, 1855), XXV.

⁵⁸ Guardino, *Peasants, Politics and the Formation of Mexico's National State*, 164.

to meet in the town of La Victoria in order to negotiate a settlement. This never came to pass, as thousands of plebeians, some armed, cheered Gúzman along the road. Seeing the risk of popular revolt and unwilling to risk turning the society upside down by provoking a plebeian revolution, Gúzman never met with Páez.⁵⁹

Actively following all of these events was Ezequiel Zamora, a young llanero merchant, and a member of a small Liberal Society in the La Victoria region. The society, somewhat similar to a political club, consisted of notable local liberals, and provided a forum for political discussion. Zamora was active in politics, and he campaigned for the Liberal Party during the elections of 1846. Likely due to his activism, prior to the election his citizenship rights were stripped from him for four years by his local assembly.⁶⁰ Angered by this, and by the government's suppression of liberal electoral victories, Zamora went to La Victoria for the meeting between Páez and Leocadio. While there, Zamora conversed with local liberals and read liberal newspapers, ultimately concluding it was necessary to "...make the revolution *sin conocer un caudillo...*" asserting that a popular revolution did not require any elite backing.⁶¹ In rejecting a caudillo, Zamora rejected the idea that the llanero liberals should rely on powerful or wealthy sponsors for support. Local liberals were unimpressed by Gúzman's reluctance to confront Páez. Zamora and his fellow liberals, Dr. Manuel María Echeandía and Manuel Ibarra, meeting not long after the events on the road, concluded that he was a coward, and if they wished to resist the conservatives, they would be on their own.⁶²

⁵⁹ Zahler, *Ambitious Rebels*, 225-226.

⁶⁰ Damaris Cordero Negrin, *Ezequiel Zamora*, 42-43. Imbedded in this book by a Venezuelan historian about the life of Zamora is a transcript of his interrogation by conservative government authorities after he was captured while fighting in the 1846 rebellion.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 61.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 43.

However, without the support of the national liberal leadership, Zamora and his comrades would have to find allies to fight with them. Having resolved that revolution was the only option, the conspirators decided to seek that support in the llanos. Zamora himself was directed to “...raise the people of the mountains and the lower llanos.”⁶³ Rather than looking for support among *mantuano* elites, Venezuela’s most radical liberals instead turned towards the rural poor of the llanos. By seeking an alliance with the rural poor, Zamora offered the llaneros an opportunity to influence national politics once again. In doing so, Zamora recognized that while the constitution denied plebeians any place in the political sphere, plebeians still thought of themselves as *ciudadanos* and members of the national community.

Zamora’s appeals to plebeians also emphasized discourses of citizenship. When asked by his interrogator what he had offered plebeians in the village of Tacasuruma to convince them to join him, Zamora responded “I did not offer them anything. They followed me because I invited them to defend the patria, liberty, and the law that the oligarchs had broken.”⁶⁴ His appeals thus centered around liberty, and the duty of *ciudadanos* to rise up against a government that violated the law, key aspects of citizenship. Furthermore, according to Zamora, this discourse was successful in garnering recruits from the poor llaneros. This once again shows that the llaneros thought of themselves as *ciudadanos*, and accepted they had a duty to defend *their* patria. Indeed, Zamora’s choice to invoke the patria in his appeals exemplifies his incipient nationalist discourse. However, the patria is invoked against the “oligarchs” of the government, thus identifying the conservative government as itself an anti-national force. For Zamora, the poor were the defenders of the patria against the machinations of the oligarchical government.

⁶³ Ibid., 43-44.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 45.

For Zamora and his conservative opponents, the idea of patria had very different meanings. Zamora's conservative interrogator was seemingly both confused and aghast at Zamora's claims that his revolt was a defense of the patria, asking "How can you explain to me your intention to serve your patria by taking up arms against the established government?" Conservative notions of patria emphasized themes of legality and order, and of the duty of *ciudadanos* to respect the established government. This is further emphasized in the interrogator's following question, asking whether or not Zamora was aware that a special law had outlawed the liberal papers he was so fond of.⁶⁵ Thus, for conservatives, the patria was supposed to be orderly and made up of *ciudadanos* who respected the government and social hierarchies. Such a definition ultimately forced plebeians to either accept oppressive jornalero laws and disenfranchisement or be excluded from the patria.

While radical liberals like Zamora also used appeals to constitutional principles and order in their discourses, they had a more expansive definition of the patria. Responding to his interrogator's challenge, Zamora stated that he "...believed that a government that infringes the law authorizes the citizens to rise in mass against it."⁶⁶ Later he further clarified his position, stating "I rose against the government because it was said in the multitude of the newspapers... that the government had infringed the constitution and laws of the Nation, I thought to render a service to my patria, obeying the cry of all good *ciudadanos*..."⁶⁷ While both Zamora and his interrogator referenced legal obligation in defining the patria, they invoked the law for different rhetorical purposes. The interrogator emphasized the obligations the law placed on individual citizens to obey and preserve the social order and state. Zamora instead focuses on how the law

⁶⁵ Ibid., 38.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 38.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 54. Emphasis added.

and liberal principles constrained the government and obligated it to respect the rights of *ciudadanos*. For Zamora, a government that broke those laws and norms was acting against the patria, justifying a revolution of the *ciudadanos*. Thus, Zamora identifies patria more with the people and their rights than with government. This distinction is vital, as a people-focused definition of the patria was far more conducive to nationalist appeals, and secondly, because Zamora chose to make this appeal to poor plebeians. When Zamora called on the residents of Tacasuruma to perform their duty as *ciudadanos* and rise up against the oligarchy, he was not only asserting their right to be *ciudadanos*, but also their right to a place in the republican patria.

Zamora's discourse was not only nationalist in its invocations of the patria, but also in its ability to unite different social groups in what he viewed as the defense of the patria. If the ideology of the patria remained primarily the realm of *letrado* intellectuals, not affecting or even known by the plebeian majority, a nation could not truly exist. The exigencies of wars spurred Zamora to begin to bridge this divide. Asked how he had garnered recruits, Zamora responded that he "Read the papers published by the liberal press to them... and they [his soldiers] loaded them in abundance in their hats."⁶⁸ More than a simple recruiting method, this practice of reading newspapers to plebeian liberals brought two different worlds together. On the one hand, there was the world of *letrado* liberal journalists, who objected to the government's violations of the constitution and liberal principles. On the other, were the poor llaneros, denied their dignity by constitutional exclusion from full citizenship through property requirements and jornalero laws. By bringing the salon and the llanos together, Zamora was acting as a kind of mediator, presenting liberal ideas, and more importantly the liberal party, to the poor as an ally in their struggle for autonomy and equality. The choice of the soldiers to begin carrying the newspapers

⁶⁸ Ibid., 46.

in their hats represents their enthusiasm for this proposition. Zamora was thus beginning to form a truly national liberal movement, that could unite both rural plebeians and liberal journalists under the banner of patria and liberty.

While it is obscured by his appeals to legality and the constitution, Zamora's discourse was very radical. He was not only contending that the llaneros were a part of the patria, but its best defenders as well. In identifying the patria with the poor, he separated the wealthy conservatives from the patria, indeed, casting them as an anti-patriotic force. Thus, the concept of the nation proposed by Zamora turned the philosophy that had produced the jornalero laws on its head, identifying the rural llaneros as the good and patriotic *ciudadanos*, while the wealthy undermined their patria. Such a conception of the patria carried undertones of social rebellion that were deeply frightening to conservatives. Indeed, Zamora's interrogator accused him of fomenting race war and planning to redistribute land. Of course, Zamora denied this and there is no evidence that the liberal rebels ever supported such measures at that time.⁶⁹ However, the very action of putting weapons into the hands of plebeians and telling them that they were the defenders of the patria upended a social structure that demanded subservience, not action, from plebeians. The liberal nationalism that was developing under Zamora's leadership was a challenge to social and political hierarchies that were seen as impeding the nation, rather than to territorial or political disunity.

Thus, while the ideas about patria and liberty that Zamora preached were derived from letrado liberal journalists and politicians, Zamora was careful to present them in a fashion that was appealing and relevant to plebeian llaneros. But, by altering the notion of patria so that it

⁶⁹ Ibid., 78.

became a challenge to a social order that demanded deference and subservience from plebeians, Zamora to some degree lost control of his own ideology. The assertion that plebeians were coequal *ciudadanos* and part of the patria did not only imply a duty on the part of plebeians to defend the nation, but also the right of plebeians to make demands on the nation. Zamora had thus opened the door to allowing plebeians to themselves begin to define exactly what patria meant. This plebeian nationalism thus began to have an important impact on the broader liberal nationalism espoused by Zamora.

Ezequiel Zamora's testimony is not the only window we have into the political views of the plebeian rebels. Though not from Zamora's band specifically, the interrogations of one group of captured liberals has been preserved. The vast majority of the captured rebel rank-and-file were laborers and artisans, while the leaders were hacendados and merchants.⁷⁰ Similar to Zamora, the plebeian soldiers declared that they had joined the rebellion to defend the law and constitution against an abusive elite. However, plebeians also condemned how the government's policies oppressed the poor. One carpenter even related how their battle cry was "Viva the government and death to the oppressors!"⁷¹ Even though the government was currently in the hands of the same oppressors they condemned, the llanero rebels chose to separate, and indeed place in opposition to one another, the government and the oppressors. For plebeian liberals, the duties of the government were seen as more expansive. Not only did it have to adhere to the legal norms established in the constitution, it also had to respect the rights of the poor, and not try to take from them their status as *ciudadanos*. An oppressive government could not, in their view, be legitimate. Rather, they and their liberal allies, as patriotic *ciudadanos* rising up against

⁷⁰ Zahler, *Ambitious Rebels*, 226-227.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 236.

oppression, were the true government. Plebeians, noting the language that men like Zamora used to condemn the governments violations of the constitution, used similar themes to condemn the social oppression the government had foisted on them.

Thus far, this section's focus has been on the political and social dimensions that formed the intersecting nationalisms and understandings of patria of Zamora and his plebeian soldiers. However, another important aspect of nationalism, particularly in the 19th century, was its link to the romantic movement. Indeed, romanticized poetry, art, and history were often used to convey ideas of national identity and values. Zamora, by the time of the rebellion, had clearly begun to inculcate romanticized and patriotic notions of Venezuelan history. Asked by his interrogator what means he intended to use to win his rebellion, Zamora responded that "... having read in the history of Venezuela how General Páez, with only his valor and his devotion to the tricolor flag, had triumphed over entire lines of the enemies of the patria, I proposed to imitate him, exhorting my comrades with the same expressions..."⁷² Zamora's notion that patriotic devotion alone was enough to win the Wars of Independence fits in perfectly with the romantic liberal nationalism of the era. His choice to use Páez as the exemplar of patriotic devotion, however, seems strange and counterproductive, as Páez was one of the conservative leaders that Zamora had revolted against. But, interestingly, Páez, though a conservative, was not from the traditional *mantuano* elite, but was himself a llanero, who had helped turn the tide in the Wars of Independence when he and his army of llanero plebeians allied with Bolívar. Zamora's comments can thus be seen as a subtle dig at Páez and the conservatives, who, while having been patriotic in their fight for independence, had ultimately betrayed the poor llaneros who had formed the basis of their armies. It was for the new generation of patriotic llaneros, like Zamora

⁷² Damarys Cordero Negrin, *Ezequiel Zamora*, 49.

and his comrades, to set right the wrongs done by Páez. As such, while Zamora's liberal nationalism was heavily influenced by romantic notions of patriotism and history, he employed those ideas in order to further emphasize the rhetorical divide between patriotic llaneros and traitorous oligarchs.

Another important aspect of Zamora's use of romantic tropes was how it framed the present conflict between liberals and conservatives in reference to the Wars of Independence. By stating that in rebelling, he and his comrades were simply imitating Páez's triumphs over "the enemies of the patria," Zamora was associating the present conservative oligarchy with the Spanish Empire. This is not to say that Zamora viewed the conservatives as covert royalists or Spaniards. Rather, it shows how by the 1840s, "the oligarchs" had begun to step into the rhetorical role the Spanish Empire had previously played, that of the "enemy of the patria." Thus, rather than radical liberal and plebeian nationalism being directed against another nation or people, it was directed against an internal elite or oligarchy that was seen as abusing its power and wealth for its own gain and at the expense of the rights and dignity of the *ciudadanos*. This distinction in who was classified as an enemy of the patria helps explain why nationalism could be so appealing to plebeians in early republican Latin America.

Romantic nationalism was not only a way for Zamora to frame his rebellion, it also provided a code of conduct. Asked by his interrogators whether he planned during the rebellion to kill "all the oligarchs," Zamora responded that he "...proclaimed various times to my troops with very serious warnings that they should not commit any criminal act, making them see and inculcating in them that such abominable and anti-social conduct was only worthy of Boves and

Cisneros.” Boves and Cisneros were both royalist commanders during the Independence Wars.⁷³ Zamora measured the conduct of himself and his troops against a pantheon of heroes and villains derived from the Independence Wars. While rebellion against an unjust government was a patriotic action, and the duty of good citizens, for plebeians to wage social war against the elites as a class, rather than as purely ideological foes, was a crime equal to any committed by the enemies of the patria. This seems to be an attempt on Zamora’s part to reassert some of the control over the idea of patria he had lost when he asserted that plebeians too had a right to a place in it. While Zamora, as a radical liberal, was comfortable with the idea that plebeians were *ciudadanos* and deserving of equal respect, he still saw plebeians as only one part of a wider multiclass liberal and nationalist coalition which opposed the elite oligarchs not solely because they were wealthy and powerful, but because they abused their power.

Ultimately, however, Zamora’s rebellion failed. The conservative government deployed large numbers of troops, which overwhelmed the rebels’ small bands, and captured Zamora. It thus seemed that the conservatives were again firmly in control of the reins of power by the time their candidate, José Tadeo Monagas, finally assumed office in March 1847. However, to the conservatives’ horror, Monagas promptly appointed a liberal cabinet, commuted the sentences of liberal leaders including Zamora and Guzmán, and began to support liberal policies. Monagas had effectively switched parties, provoking the wrath of the conservatives, but winning him the support of the nation’s liberals. However, the congress, still controlled by the conservatives, bitterly opposed Monagas’s attempts to push liberal reforms through by decree. By 1848, tensions had reached such a point that on January 24th liberal *caraqueños* stormed the congress

⁷³ Damarys Cordero Negrin, *Ezequiel Zamora*, 78.

building.⁷⁴ This uprising, coming slightly less than a month before the February Revolution in France, thus constitutes the first revolution of 1848.

Páez, outraged at the events in the capital, promptly proclaimed a revolt against Monagas on the 4th of February. In many ways, Páez's proclamation was similar to Zamora's earlier proclamations, calling on Venezuelans to rise up against the "enemies of the patria," who had broken the constitution.⁷⁵ However, the proclamation, while incorporating patriotic themes, remained a fundamentally conservative appeal, focusing on how "the members of the congress risked their lives to save the institutions of the republic."⁷⁶ Indeed, when Páez did reference patriotic devotion, it was found in "...those venerable patriots..." among the congress or "...the true patriots..." showing that even Páez himself felt the need to distinguish between the "true" patriotism of the elite and the radical patriotism of plebeians.⁷⁷ While the rebellion of 1846 had brought politics that hinged on patriotic appeals to plebeians to stand up as *ciudadanos* to defend *their* patria, conservatives were still clinging to the idea that plebeians could be kept out of both politics and the patria.

Monagas was far better attuned to the new political realities. Releasing his own proclamation in response four days later, Monagas thundered:

Venezuelans: The patria calls you to defend her liberty and save your rights. A criminal and detestable conspiracy captained by... [Páez]... has raised its denigrated standard... he has raised against the patria, in imitation of the other

⁷⁴ Zahler, *Ambitious Rebels*, 237-238.

⁷⁵ Tomás Michelena, *Resumen de la vida militar y política del ciudadano esclarecido General José Antonio Páez* (Caracas: Tipografía de el Cojo, 1890), 147-148. This source is a later biography of Páez that contains a complete text of Páez February 4th proclamation.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 145.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 146-147.

tyrants of America, the sword that was given to him for the defense of her institutions... he will not find traitors who follow him... no, in Venezuela there are no vile slaves that prefer ignominy to liberty, the arbitrary regime to the placid and beneficial rule of law. Venezuelans, the government that watches over the defense and conservation of our rights, counts on the most secure triumph; nothing can resist the impulse of your patriotism, your pure love of the constitution, and that irresistible valor...⁷⁸

From the start, Monagas frames the declaration as a patriotic call to arms, but not simply for plebeian liberals to defend the institutions of the patria, but its liberty and their rights as well. While Monagas also references the importance of republican institutions, similar to Zamora he contends Páez and the elite are the true threat to them, whereas the plebeians who stormed the congress were their true defenders. While Monagas does appeal to the rule of law and order, ultimately it is the government's role as a protector of the rights of the people that legitimizes it and earns it the valorous patriotism of plebeians. Monagas's proclamation thus adopted similar rhetoric to that used by Zamora and his llanero soldiers in the 1846 rebellion. Monagas had learned from the mistakes of Leocadio Guzmán two years before, and instead of shunning plebeian nationalism, he actively appealed to it.

The January Revolution was the culmination of the Rebellion of 1846. Angry plebeians, rejecting a political system that excluded them, and a social hierarchy that oppressed them, stormed the very center of state power, and forced the reorganization of the government. They did so under the blessing of president who, just as the leaders of the 1846 rebellion had done,

⁷⁸ "Venezuela." *El español* (Madrid). April 9, 1848, 1.

appealed to them on the basis of their membership in the patria, and their rights and duties as *ciudadanos*. Ultimately this blow was too powerful for the conservative oligarchy to fend off. Government forces, along with liberal militias that included Ezequiel Zamora, ultimately defeated Páez and forced him into exile later that year.⁷⁹

While the historiography of 1848 has largely analyzed the revolutions as if they were a solely European event, contemporaries thought differently. Later in the year, another Venezuelan liberal, Rafael Acevedo, wrote his own response to Páez's proclamations, in which he declared that "the event of the 24th of January was a glorious one, like that of the 24th of February that dissolved the French legislature and established a republic: it was an event that the Venezuelan people will remember with pride, because it will serve as a terrible lesson to the delegates of the people in all representative governments that they should never think to abuse their power..."⁸⁰ The 24th of January was not considered somehow lesser than the events that followed in Europe, indeed, Acevedo saw both events as part of a wider transatlantic series of revolutions. He was even convinced that its example, rather than that of France, would remain foremost in the minds of future generations. The *primavera de los pueblos* began not in Europe, but in Latin America.

However, while certainly the January Revolution was part of a transatlantic trend, it was produced by processes unique to Venezuela. It had begun not in the power centers on the coast, like Caracas, but at the margins of Venezuelan society, in the llanos, and it was led not by major national politicians, but by the relatively unknown members of a rural liberal society. The crucible of revolution in Venezuela was the interaction between plebeians, who demanded inclusion in the patria as *ciudadanos*, and radical liberal mediators, who presented their cause

⁷⁹ Zahler, *Ambitious Rebels*, 238-239.

⁸⁰ Rafael Acevedo, *Una lijera contestación al manifiesto de Páez* (San Tomas, 1848), 7.

and party as the best ally plebeians had in their struggle. The intersection of plebeian nationalism with Zamora's liberal program resulted in a new radical liberal nationalism, that incorporated aspects both elite and plebeian conceptions of the patria. Ultimately, it would be this ideology that Monagas would use to justify and defend the January Revolution. Of course, Monagas was clearly opportunistic in his sudden adoption of the new rhetoric of patria. At the same time, the fact that an opportunist would choose to appeal to the nationalism of plebeians is a testament to its power in the political sphere. What exactly the patria ought to be was decided in concert with, rather than imposed on, plebeians.

Ramón Mercado and the Social Revolution in Spanish America

As Venezuelans grappled with the aftermath of the January Revolution, across the border in Colombia, an electoral campaign was beginning. By the late 1840s, the Conservative and Liberal parties had begun to take shape, and in the elections of 1848, they contested the presidency. While the Conservatives relied mostly on personalistic appeals through patronage networks and bribery, the Liberals appealed to the masses by promising that their candidate, former independence wars general José Hilario López, would defend liberty from the oligarchy, and protect the right of the poor to access public lands. Rather than emphasizing the personal virtue or intelligence of the candidate, this new style of campaigning, which focused on concrete policies and a new vision for the nation, appealed directly to the rural poor, while deeply frightening the conservatives.⁸¹ Despite the fear López awoke in the traditional elite, he managed to win in the elections, and his new liberal administration took office on the 7th of March 1849.

⁸¹ Sanders, *Contentious Republicans*, 69-70.

López promised that the new government would be "... of the pueblo and for the pueblo."⁸² Colombians, too, were excited to take part in the *primavera de los pueblos*.

In the southern Cauca, a young lawyer named Ramón Mercado watched the events in Bogotá with growing excitement. While in the north things had begun to change, Mercado observed that in the south, "No republican feature shows in that province of *señores* and serfs..." The southern provinces "presented such an aspect of hispanicism and colonialism that an impartial observer could not but have believed..." themselves to be living in medieval times.⁸³ In Mercado's view, independence had wrought no effect on the social order of the south, which remained mired in a feudal and hierarchical state, denying the poor their humanity. Further, the situation was not just feudal, but colonial, in Mercado's view a direct consequence of the three preceding centuries of Spanish colonialism. Mercado even went so far as to argue that "... the war against Spain was not a revolution... it did not but modify very superficially the epidermis of the social problem... so América was nationalized, the chain tying it like a slave across the oceans to the Catholic Throne broken, [however] always continued the brandishing of the whip raised over the people."⁸⁴ While independence had given Latin Americans political independence, on a social level they were still dominated by the hierarchies established by Spanish colonialism. For Mercado, political change alone could not bring about the true republic. Rather, the social system that privileged powerful land owners over the rural poor had to be dismantled before a truly democratic society could be constructed.

At the core of the Cauca's afflictions was slavery. In Mercado's view, the institution caused society to lose any conception of the humanity of the slaves, leading to abuse and "many

⁸² Ibid., 58.

⁸³ Mercado, *Memorias sobre los acontecimientos del sur de la Nueva Granada*, VIII.

⁸⁴ Ibid., VI.

cases of slave deaths due to the cruelty of their *señores*, without the society becoming alarmed, nor were made useful the attributes and properties of justice.” Besides the dehumanizing affects inherent in it, slavery was also buttressed by a “Certain solidarity between the slaveowners...” to protect their common interests against any investigation into their treatment of their slaves, a solidarity which made all masters complicit in the misconduct of the others, regardless of how each treated their own slaves.⁸⁵ Mercado’s analysis thus condemns the masters of the Cauca not as individuals, but as a class which exploited the poor for their own benefit and abused their privileged position in society to shield themselves from prosecution. Just like Zamora in Venezuela, Mercado identified the great social ills of society as being perpetrated by an abusive and undemocratic oligarchy. However, Mercado went beyond Zamora in arguing that the slave-owning oligarchy was more than a group of immoral elites, but rather constituted an inherently unjust class.

While deeply concerned with the economic and political aspects of the hierarchies of the Cauca, Mercado was also concerned with how the social order preserved colonial caste distinctions. Within the aristocratic social order of the Cauca, “The populations, then, were divided in diverse classes, characterized with denigrating and depressive names like, *mulatos*, *zambos cuarterones*, *mestizos &c.*” Rather than adhering to the juridical color blindness independence had brought, racial distinctions still determined the position and opportunities of the Cauca’s people.⁸⁶ While Mercado was most immediately concerned with the inequality the unofficial caste system caused, castes also presented a threat to the very idea of a Colombian nation. The use of racial castes to categorize population ran directly contrary to the idea that all

⁸⁵ Ibid., IX.

⁸⁶ Ibid., XI.

were coequal citizens and members of a single national community. When the caste system combined with “the terrible distribution of land ownership” in the south the result was that, rather than a flourishing nation of equals, “... an aristocracy with all the habits of the Spanish nobility...” dominated over the “*jente del pueblo*.”⁸⁷

Mercado’s political vision was not confined solely to his own nation. Across Latin America, every nation was struggling with the still powerful legacies of the Spanish Empire. There was “oppression... in Peru, oppression in Chile... oppression in Buenos Aires, oppression in Ecuador, oppression in New Grenada! Silence in América!”⁸⁸ Despite the great challenges Mercado saw in Latin America’s path, he remained optimistic about its future. Inspired by the Ecuadorian Revolution of 1845 and the Revolutions of 1848 in Europe, Mercado argued that the time had come for a “social revolution in Spanish America” that would at long last sweep away

... the exploitation of the poor, the chains of the slave, the cries ripped from the helpless, of gibbets and gallows, tributes demanded from the worker for the benefit of the privileged vagabond, of injustice and inequity, the abomination that Spain had forged for América...⁸⁹

Mercado envisioned all Latin America as engaged in a great struggle between the oppression implanted in it by Spain, and the renovating spirit of a republicanism that championed not just the ideal of democracy, but the cause of the poor and oppressed against the aristocracy. This rhetoric of an oligarchy associated with Spanish colonialism confronted by the poor, is deeply similar to Zamora’s appeals for causing “horror to the oligarchy,” made only a few years earlier

⁸⁷ Ibid., XII.

⁸⁸ Ibid., V.

⁸⁹ Ibid., V-VI.

in Venezuela. At the same time, however, Mercado's appeal went farther than Zamora's, calling not just for opposition to the constitutional trespasses of the oligarchy, but for a social revolution to wash out all injustice from not just Colombia but Latin America as a whole.

With López's liberal administration taking office on the 7th of March, Mercado was eager to make his vision of social revolution reality in the Cauca. On the 20th of July, Mercado and other liberals founded a "Democratic Society" in the city of Cali, with between 800 and 1000 *ciudadanos* attending the first meeting.⁹⁰ The society, named after a society of artisans in Bogotá, had its roots in the liberal societies that had helped propel Hilario López to the presidency in 1848-49. However, rather than being a mere electoral society, this new society provided a space where men, whatever their social status, could gather to discuss politics and hear the latest news.⁹¹ Cali's society first turned its attention towards protesting against the aguardiente monopolies that threatened the livelihoods of the poor and against slavery. The society also appointed "agents of peace," who were tasked with cultivating in the society's "members a spirit of conciliation and Christian fraternity..."⁹² The society thus not only sought to provide the poor a chance to voice their grievances, it also sought to cultivate in them a sense of fraternity through shared struggle. This message of fraternity was a challenge to the caste system, and an attempt to integrate the poor as equals into the nation. Mercado and his fellow caucano radical liberals hoped to bring the poor into the nation by joining them in their struggle against social injustices.

⁹⁰ Ibid., XVIII.

⁹¹ Sanders, *Contentious Republicans*, 66-67.

⁹² Mercado, *Memorias sobre los acontecimientos del sur de la Nueva Granada*, XVIII.

More than a political or mutual aid society, Cali's Democratic Society served as the center of national fraternity in Cauca society. The society proclaimed as its motto "every *ciudadano* should know two things, to provide their subsistence and to defend their patria."⁹³ The society thus asserted from the outset that the rural poor were, as *ciudadanos*, a part of the national community, and thus had an obligation to defend the patria. Interestingly, this obligation to the patria is placed directly alongside the obligation to support oneself and family, identifying the national family with the individual family. Further, the identification of subsistence and the defense of the patria imbues the patria with sense that it is life-giving, as vital to human existence as water or bread. This connection drawn between the patria and subsistence is particularly subversive, considering, as noted above, the greatest challenge the poor of the Cauca faced was the absorption of their *ejidos* by hacendados. Beyond its motto, the society also required that its members enlist in the national guard.⁹⁴ The obligation of national guard service, besides providing another pulpit from which to teach patriotic values, also provided the poor an opportunity to participate in a national institution, an opportunity previously denied to them by constitutional exclusion from citizenship. The Caucaños would not only be taught what the patria was by radical mediators, but also carve their own place in it.

The foundation of this "Democratic Society," was not welcomed by conservatives, who called Mercado and his allies "red democrats," and eventually founded their own "Society of the Friends of the People," towards the end of 1849 in an attempt to compete with the liberals.⁹⁵ The dispute between the two societies began to intensify in March, as the liberals prepared to celebrate the first anniversary of the López administration taking office on the 7th.

⁹³ Ibid., XVIII.

⁹⁴ Ibid., XVIII.

⁹⁵ Ibid., XIX; XXIV.

To demonstrate their popularity to the Society of the Friends of the People, the Democratic Society decided to organize a celebration of the anniversary. However, the Democratic Society was unfortunately left without any music to accompany their party, as the entirety of the local philharmonic society was made up of conservatives. The party was thus held in silence, but, in Mercado's words, the silence "... that ordinarily precedes the great eruptions of volcanoes." The conservatives, hoping to upstage the orchestrally challenged liberals with their own party on the 10th, organized a gathering of "noisy pomp." Two hundred conservative militiamen (who are referred to by Mercado as "guapetones") even came from another town in the Cauca. Cali's *democráticos*, fearing a potential mutiny against the government, organized to disrupt the sonorous conservative gathering. When the conservatives left their gathering place to march through the town, shouting their customary "*vivas i mueras*," they confronted by a crowd of plebeians, shouting challenges and impeding them from exiting. Mercado saw this as the first true confrontation between "the people, wanting to assert themselves, and the haughty oligarchy, who look on them like a dream, full of rage and contempt."⁹⁶

Reflecting on the results of the near-violent confrontation between the liberals and conservatives of Cali, Mercado remarked that "Separated until then, the plebe from the nation... and in the effervescent state of the parties, to ask of them prudence was the same as to ask calm of a furious sea."⁹⁷ In the decades after independence, the plebeians of the Cauca, due to having been dominated by the conservative hacendados who controlled the land, had been excluded from the nation. However, with the foundation of the Democratic Society, the poor had been offered a voice in society, a voice they eagerly used to defend their liberal allies against the

⁹⁶ Ibid., XXI-XXII.

⁹⁷ Ibid., XXIV.

increasingly hostile conservatives. Indeed, Cali's liberal party was "composed almost exclusively of the scorned masses."⁹⁸ In giving the poor a voice in politics, the Democratic Society had also given them a stake in the nation, as plebeians would work side by side with liberal mediators to make reforms that would improve their conditions. Mercado's fiery brand of radical liberal nationalism encouraged popular politics not as a solely electoral or strategic tool, but as a way to bridge the gap between plebian and nation.

Liberal efforts towards nationalist reform were, however, beginning to run up against political resistance. The governor of the province of Buenaventura, Dr. Manuel Dolores Camacho, was a wealthy landowner and conservative, who supported his own financial interests over the "interests of the public." However, the time was coming to name a new governor to the province, and the liberals threw their weight behind Ramón Mercado.⁹⁹ While the idea of Mercado as governor horrified "the oligarchy of the south," the constitution permitted President López to select the new governor, and he promptly settled on Mercado.¹⁰⁰ Mercado reflected how the foundation Democratic Society and the 7th of March Administration had fundamentally altered his native Cauca. As the traditional conservative elite lost its grip on power, and the caste system was increasingly discarded, "the popular masses of the south" transformed into "active entities, whose efforts directed to break the chains of the oppressed, raised on high their rights, against the exceptional causes that served as titles of tyranny."¹⁰¹ The masses, once oppressed by feudalism, were now the redemptive and revolutionary force that, under the banner of the Liberal Party, would sweep the oligarchy from power.

⁹⁸ Ibid., XXV.

⁹⁹ Ibid., XXV-XXVI.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., XXVII.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., XXX.

Regardless of Mercado's constitutional right to assume the governorship, from the very beginning he had to rely on popular support to sustain his administration. On the day of Mercado's inauguration, the conservatives, led by the powerful local hacendado, Julio Arboleda, planned to disrupt the ceremony with a protest. They arrived armed and uniformed, prepared for a fight with "the poor *democráticos* of the *ruana*."¹⁰² As the conservatives began denouncing the government during the ceremony, Mercado's plebeian supporters responded with "*vivas* to the government in the corridors of the house and at the side of the street." While the situation was volatile, after Mercado officially took power, he was able to calm matters.¹⁰³ With the political participation of the masses, the struggle between liberal and conservative societies began to show aspects of class struggle. The wealthy launched their offensive with the hope of constraining the political influence of plebeians, while the "men of the *ruana*" rushed to defend their party, leading to open fighting in the streets. However, while class was an aspect of the unfolding struggle in Cali, Mercado identifies the plebeian's revolutionary potential not solely in their condition as a class, but in their commitment to democratic ideals. Indeed, Mercado later noted that it was at "at the side of the popular mass" that he "encountered the inspiration of the democratic idea."¹⁰⁴ The poor were identified as the true bearers of the standards of progress and freedom, against the power of the wealthy oligarchs.

Just as Mercado saw plebeians as democracy's best allies, he also saw them as the natural defenders of the nation. Concerned about the growing conflict between the conservatives and liberals, and worried about the possibility of civil war, Mercado resolved to call on "all the *ciudadanos*, from one or the other faction" to join the national guard. In calling for this patriotic

¹⁰² A *ruana* is a type of poncho, associated with the rural poor

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, XXXI.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, XXXI.

levée en masse, he hoped to gather the “true republicans,” who would be ready to defend the government in the event of war. His call was immediately heard by the local liberals and democratic society members, the “generality” of whom enlisted immediately. The conservatives however largely refused to join, not wishing to be confused with “the plebe or the men of the ruana.”¹⁰⁵ The Democratic Society’s work in the Cauca was paying dividends, as plebeians eagerly rushed to defend the nation when called upon. Meanwhile, the wealthy avoided that duty, showing open contempt for the institution. Enthusiastically patriotic, plebeians were angered by the conservative’s lack of patriotism, and a number of the conservative’s supporters went over to the “democratic ranks.” The open decision of the conservatives to show that they followed “the flags of the oligarchy” rather than the national one, had caused an outburst of nationalist anger among plebeians.¹⁰⁶ Just as had occurred in Venezuela, the traditional idea that the wealthy were the only true patriots was turned on its head, as plebeians increasingly saw themselves as the defenders of the nation against anti-patriotic oligarchs.

The social system of the Cauca was thus falling apart. Radical plebeians denounced the wealthy as antipatriotic, took up arms, and engaged in street fights against conservatives to support their candidates. The challenge that combative and revolutionary plebeian masses posed frightening to conservatives and many elite liberals as well, as it threatened to undo the social and economic system that empowered them.¹⁰⁷ Mercado, however, while at times concerned by the possibility of violent excesses made by plebeians, never saw them as a destructive, irrational or apolitical force. Hoping to clarify the popular cause, Mercado gave an address to the public, in which he identified the chief causes of discontent. Among them, he identified slavery, the abuse

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, XXXIV.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, XXXV.

¹⁰⁷ Sanders, *Contentious Republicans*, 79-80.

of tenants and debtors by the propertied, monopolies, and first and foremost “the conduct of some of the propertied relative to the disputed lands of the *ejidos*.”¹⁰⁸ The masses were not fighting solely for political change, but for a fundamental change in the distribution of land and wealth in society. Though the defense of the *ejidos* and the rights of debtors and tenants contradicted traditional liberal notions of property, Mercado, as a social revolutionary, was sympathetic to the plebeians’ demands. Indeed, in his view, the whole system of land tenure and the predicament of the landless poor was not the product of free institutions, but the implantation of Spanish colonialism. The “future of liberty” that shone in “the avid eyes of the masses” was thus not mere political democracy, but a social revolution, that would redistribute power more equally across society.¹⁰⁹

To all the tumults and struggles that came with plebeian radicalism, Mercado gave the name “epoch of *renacimiento*,” rebirth.¹¹⁰ The phrase calls to mind the Italian *risorgimento*, and the struggles for national liberation that characterized the Revolutions of 1848 in Europe. However, when Garibaldi or Mazzini called for *risorgimento*, it was in opposition to an imperial overlord, Austria. Mercado on the other hand, called for *renacimiento* in the face of a domestic oligarchy. Still, while this oligarchy was not imperial, radical liberal nationalists like Mercado identified it with colonialism. As we have seen, they argued that “the oligarchy” was the continuation of the same injustices of colonial rule, perpetuating the economic, political, and spiritual evils of Spanish colonialism even after the empire’s dissolution. Thus, the struggle against the oligarchy was conceived of as a nationalist movement to free Colombia, and Latin Americas as a whole, from the vestiges of colonialism. That radical liberals in Latin America

¹⁰⁸Mercado, *Memorias sobre los acontecimientos del sur de la Nueva Granada*, XLI.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, XLII.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, XLII.

directed their nationalist crusade against an internal oligarchy, rather than an external empire, is vital to understanding its social radicalism. In opposing the wealthy oligarchy, radical liberals found their best allies in plebeians. This incorporation of plebeians into the nationalist coalition meant the struggle increasingly had to be waged for social as well as political rights. The very way radical liberals in 19th Latin America conceived of nationalism thus inherently drove them towards social revolution.

The political and social struggle between plebeians and elites only intensified as 1850 came to an end. On December 30th, when a group of 200 some conservatives marched armed through the streets condemning the government, plebeians confronted them with stones and sticks. In the ensuing fighting, the conservative's leader, Antonio Boso, was captured, and turned over to local authorities. Mercado ultimately decided to release Boso and the other prisoners, under the condition they left the province.¹¹¹ The events of December 30th preceded a larger plebeian revolt, known as the *Zurriago*. Beginning in Cali in early 1851, plebeians, especially former slaves, took to the streets armed with whips and clubs, attacking wealthy hacendados and conservatives. As the revolt spread outwards to the rest of the Cauca, haciendas and property were destroyed.¹¹² After months of scuffles, traded insults, and the fiery speeches of Mercado against the oligarchy, the Cauca's plebeians launched an all-out attack against aristocratic privilege in the valley. The assaults on haciendas, and use of the whip against slave-owners, simultaneously undermined the symbolic and economic underpinnings of the social hierarchy. Mercado's social revolution had finally begun.

¹¹¹ Ibid., XLIII-XLIV.

¹¹² Sanders, *Contentious Republicans*, 81.

Plebeians' assaults on the social order went beyond attacks on individuals and raids of property, however. During the *Zurriago*, plebeians launched their most significant effort thus far to reclaim their ejidos, common lands, from the fences constructed by encroaching hacendados. Mercado witnessed the destruction of the fences around Cali, and provided a stirring description of events:

The unhappy women, wood-gathers and colliers, their children even in infancy, their fathers and their brothers, the elderly of both sexes that lived on the benefits of that land, all were sworn enemies of the fences placed by the propertied; whole swarms of those poor and needy families all night surrounded those weak barriers against necessity and justice: driven by the sting of hunger and calmed, so to speak, in their consciences by the weeping of their children that demanded the sustenance that could not be provided until now, they opened a pass throughout the odd hours of the night by iron and fire, to penetrate again to the fields that for so many years had been their hope, their solace, and their patria¹¹³

Mercado recognizes the struggle of the poor for their ejidos as a struggle for the patria. The social structure, the political system, and the distribution of lands in the Cauca had long denied plebeians any place or role in national life. This exclusion of the plebeian majority had robbed the nation of its vitality, leaving it only an oligarchic state that served as little more than a cruel mockery of democracy. While the events since 1848 had begun to renovate the political spirit of the masses, Mercado recognized that as long as land, and the power that accompanied it, were concentrated into the hands of the oligarchy, political progress would be tenuous at best. While

¹¹³ Mercado, *Memorias sobre los acontecimientos del sur de la Nueva Granada*, XLVII.

Mercado thus abandoned traditional liberal commitment to property rights, he did so to support the social equality he felt necessary to build a democratic nation.

The events of the *Zurriago* show the major transitions that had occurred in the liberal-nationalist coalition that had been taking shape since the founding of Cali's democratic society. At the outset, Mercado and his fellow radicals had taken the lead. Acting as mediators between the party and its poor supporters, they used the Democratic Society as a forum to teach plebeians about liberal notions of patria and democracy. They also saw themselves as spreading national consciousness and commitment, especially through the expansion of the national guard. But now, after more than a year of work, plebeians were becoming more assertive. They saw themselves as patriotic democrats and *ciudadanos*, politically active and defenders of the nation. With the *Zurriago*, plebeians had fought for greater autonomy under the same banners of patria and liberty that the liberals had brought in 1849. Mercado and his fellow mediators were now reacting to the political initiative that plebeians had taken on their behalf. The masses were moving beyond subalternity, becoming, in concert with their mediator allies, the shapers of their own reality.

The conservatives were horrified by the events of the *Zurriago*. Attacks on haciendas and the destruction of fences reinforced their view that the liberals, through their alliance with plebeians, had unleashed a general assault on private property. More disturbingly, attacks on masters by former slaves and the poor armed with whips provided a powerful symbol of the collapse of the social hierarchy. However, most disturbing of all was how middle-class liberals like Mercado, rather than condemning the violence, supported the plebeians and blamed the oligarchy for how it had oppressed the poor. When the national government responded to events

by highlighting the need for abolition, conservatives were only more outraged.¹¹⁴ Liberal nationalists and their plebeian allies seemed determined to destroy the social and economic system that gave elites their prestige, wealth, and power. The situation in the Cauca was by now so unbearable to the conservatives that no political solution would satisfy them. In April 1851, Mercado received a letter from the liberal governor of nearby Popayán, informing him that the conservatives planned to rise up in arms all across the south.¹¹⁵ The Civil War of 1851 had begun.

Mercado quickly began organizing a response to the “seditious rising of April.” He ordered the manufacturing of lances, while he warned other nearby governors of the threat. He also called together the officers of the local national guard and militias, formulating with them a plan for the campaign. Besides discussing their stocks of arms and military strategy, they resolved to make a general “call to arms” to the *ciudadanos*.¹¹⁶ At five in the afternoon, the 24th of April, Mercado officially issued the call to arms to the people. The response was immediate, as men from across the city rushed to the plaza, and campesinos who had come from the fields for market enlisted, pledging to return the next day. Mercado described the scene as close to 2,000 men filled the plaza: “Old men, young men, boys, all joined the mass in the public plaza, crying: *to arms* and giving *vivas* to the government and the cause of the peoples.”¹¹⁷ Mercado and the Democratic Society had clearly succeeded in their goal, as plebeians were rallying to the defense of the Liberal Party, and what was now *their* patria. However, this war, fought as it was against aristocratic rebels and under the banners of abolition and the defense of the *ejidos*, sought

¹¹⁴ Sanders, *Contentious Republicans*, 84.

¹¹⁵ Mercado, *Memorias sobre los acontecimientos del sur de la Nueva Granada*, LVI.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, LVI.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, LVII.

not just to defend the patria, but to transform it. What Mercado witnessed in the plaza was the social revolution in arms.

The enthusiasm of the volunteers filled Mercado with pride. He noted how, with “heroic patriotism,” the volunteers “forgot their interests, and gave perhaps the last goodbye to their patria in order to serve it...” Plebeians were romanticized as the selfless defenders of the nation, exemplary of the nationalism Mercado had hoped to spread. This nationalism was deeply intertwined with commitment to the “Democratic cause.”¹¹⁸ Mercado understood the events of April 1851 as decisive proof that Colombia had truly become both a nation and a democracy, not just on paper, but in the minds of plebeians. This powerful conception of a radically democratic Colombian nation permeated all aspects of the campaign, as some of the volunteers even elected their own commander!¹¹⁹ The old social order was completely in tatters, as the most radical of *ciudadanos* asserted their democratic rights even within the traditionally hierarchical military. Thus, patriotism, a desire for social reform, and a fundamental belief in democracy all drove plebeians to take up arms in the Spring of 1851.

As the columns of volunteers and national guards began to spread out across the Cauca, they found a population receptive to their radical nationalism. As they entered towns and villages throughout the region, local plazas were filled with scenes of patriotic devotion. In the hamlets of Palmaseca and Arrastradero, approximately 300 hundred volunteers were rallied to the liberal cause.¹²⁰ While the radical liberal mediators had been most active in the city of Cali, their ideology and program had wide appeal and impact in the countryside as well, drawing in more volunteers. Indeed, throughout the war, liberal mediators would, in recruiting volunteers, work to

¹¹⁸ Ibid., LXII.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., LXII.

¹²⁰ Ibid., LXVIII.

incorporate more social groups into their nationalist project. For example, when the city of Cali was threatened by conservative incursions, administrative accountant Liborio Mejia armed and organized a company of Afro-Colombians. The new company was given the all-important task of defending the local plaza against any attack.¹²¹ Middle-class professionals worked alongside Afro-Colombian peasants and artisans to organize the defense of their homes and principles. The war had created an exigency that helped transform ideas of national fraternity from academic theory to the lived reality of both plebeians and mediators.

The vital importance of the politics of the plaza to radical liberal and plebeian nationalism emerged throughout the war. Plazas, whether of important cities like Cali or small hamlets like Palmaseca, provided an open space for democratic politics. People of different ethnic, cultural, and class backgrounds could come together to hear speeches, meet local political figures, and discuss politics themselves. In this way, the plaza came to represent a microcosm of the nation, where local communities gathered to react to the evolving national politics and to assert their influence on the nation. The plaza was plebeians' most direct and accessible connection to the wider nation. During the war, the plaza was thus the obvious place for plebeians and the national guard to congregate in. Plebeians rushed to the plaza not just to volunteer, but to show their support for the government and the change it represented through their words and deeds. As such, the war of 1851 transformed plazas across the Cauca into patriotic symbols of the new, democratic, Colombian nation.

Plebeians would do more than just guard their homes and plazas, however. Conservatives had also risen up in the neighboring region of Antioquia and forced liberal general Tomás

¹²¹ Ibid., LXIX.

Herrera to retreat into the Cauca.¹²² Looking to aid their allies, Mercado and the administration of Buenaventura resolved to raise a new column to defend the border with Antioquia. Between the national guard, volunteers from the surrounding villages, and reinforcements from as far away as Panama, the Caucanos were able to raise a force of 3,000 men. Meanwhile, Herrera reorganized his army with the help of the “enthusiasm of the patriotic inhabitants of Rionegro.” In the ensuing battle of Rionegro, Herrera triumphed, in large part due to “the valor of the national guards,” and recaptured the Antioqueño capital of Medellín. Commenting on the contributions of plebeian soldiers, Mercado reflected that the only recompense for the national guards was “the embraces of their fellow *ciudadanos* and the limited but frank demonstrations of profound gratitude and recognition. Such is the effort of the popular masses!”¹²³

The Civil War of 1851 thus contributed to developing feelings of national fraternity in plebeians not just through ideology, but practical experience as well. Much like the experience of the French *sans-culottes* of 1792, in defense of their republic Colombian plebeians moved beyond parochial experiences of politics and nation, as they marched to far-flung towns and villages. In doing this, they united with other plebeian soldiers from distant villages and provinces, all in the cause of the defense of the nation. The national community thus ceased to be a primarily ideological construct, as it began to live in the ranks of the liberal armies. However, unlike the experience of revolutionary France, this was not achieved through conscription implemented by the national government, but by the cumulative effect of the actions of local mediators and plebeians. The strength of the national guard was based on the organizational efforts of the Democratic Societies, championed by figures like Mercado. The volunteers were

¹²² Ibid., LXXII-LXXIII.

¹²³ Ibid., LXXIII-LXXIV.

organized and armed by local and state governments, or at times, simply raised through the efforts of a single officer or politician. Meanwhile, as Herrera had found in Rionegro, plebeians themselves excitedly volunteered and organized themselves for battle. The revolutionary nationalist ethos grew out of the local context, and then burst into the national scene.

Amid the war, Mercado continued to rally the people to the liberal cause. On the 10th of May, as conservative forces were on the retreat, Mercado spoke before the assembled people of Cali. “Liberty, equality, and fraternity,” he declared, lived in “every one of the habitants of Buenaventura,” along with “those glorious examples of selflessness, magnanimity, and heroism, with which was marked the struggle for independence.”¹²⁴ The Civil War of 1851 was thus framed as a continuation of the wars of independence, fought for the same principles. The civil war, however, had served to further democratize those principles, making them relevant to plebeians’ lives. While independence had constituted the first call for a democratic Colombian nation, the defeat of the postcolonial oligarchy in 1851 served as the vindication of that call. The plebeians of Buenaventura were thus the new *libertadores*, continuing the work of the old.

Not long after the victories in Antioquia, the remaining rebels across the country were defeated. The Caucaño liberals were magnanimous in victory, both the local legislature and the Democratic Society appealing for the government to offer clemency to the defeated, in hope of national reconciliation.¹²⁵ This desire, however, did not dampen the liberal’s zeal for reform. Central to the laws passed by the national government in the wake of the victory was long and hard-fought emancipation of the slaves. Further, monopolies were dismantled, and taxes reduced, helping plebeians sustain their livelihoods. The legal system was also reformed, the death

¹²⁴ Ibid., 16.

¹²⁵ Ibid., LXXIV.

penalty abolished, and juries reorganized to better represent the entire population, and give plebeians a say in justice.¹²⁶ Taken together, these reforms achieved much of Mercado's hoped for social revolution. At the same time, the most important aspect of the social revolution achieved in 1851 was not a new political reform, but a deeper realignment in society. The struggle had ended the political, social, and spiritual servitude that had previously bound plebeians. The end of servitude had further prepared the way for the final step in the revolution, and the triumph of the nation – "Let us erase the distinctions of all kinds because we are all brothers."¹²⁷

In the following years, plebeians would continue to assert their voices in political and national life. In 1853, in the town of Turmequé in northern Colombia, conservative officials on the cabildo attempted to commit electoral fraud, seeking the assistance of the local priest. However, the priest refused to aid the conservatives. Angered, the conservatives forced the local *jefe politico* to expropriate the priest's house and put it up for auction. However, on the day of the auction, the priest rallied the local indigenous communities to disrupt it. The shouts and protests of the *indios* terrified the cabildo, which fled and locked themselves in their meeting hall. Following their triumph, the protestors moved on to the jefe politico's home, where they began to throw rocks at the balconies, and at a local judge, causing him to flee. By this time, the auction thoroughly disrupted, the priest convinced the protestors to disperse. The events had a lasting impact on the local authorities however, for whom "fear made them see in every *indio* a revolutionary like Robespierre."¹²⁸ Across the nation, plebeians and mediators aggressively

¹²⁶ Ibid., LXXIV-V.

¹²⁷ Ibid., LXXVIII-LXXIX

¹²⁸ *Acontecimientos de Turmequé* (Turmequé, 1853), 1-4. The author describes the Cabildo officials as members of "The Ministerial Party." While this is somewhat vague, the embryonic conservative party was named "The Ministerial Liberal Party."

challenged elites and officials, part of the rising tide of democratic politics since 1848. These democratic politics gave the new nation a distinctly plebeian character. Plebeians, whether Caucaño patriots or *indio* revolutionaries contested elite's decisions, and pushed them to uphold the ideals of democracy and fraternity that the republic rested on. After 1851, the *ciudadanos* were on the advance, and the oligarchy in retreat.

These developments at the margin increasingly found recognition on the national stage. In 1853, President Hilario López gave his last major public address as president before the convention drafting a new, liberal constitution. He opened the address with traditional radical liberal rhetoric, exalting how the republic had put the “principles of this century in front of the castles and lions of Spain...”¹²⁹ The new constitution was indeed radical, achieving the liberals most revolutionary aims. Slavery was prohibited in perpetuity, guaranteeing human servitude would never resurface in Colombia. The limits of nation and citizenship were also expanded, as universal manhood suffrage, and the assertion that anyone born in Colombia was a Colombian, formalized the expansive political and national communities.¹³⁰ While the politics of inclusive nationalism had begun at the margins of the Colombian state, it now found representation in the state's fundamental law.

The events that had rocked Colombia since 1848 bore deep similarity to those in Venezuela after 1846. In both nations, local liberal societies, faced with the opposition of an intransigent conservative oligarchy, formed an alliance with local plebeians. The protagonists of these alliances, Ezequiel Zamora and Ramón Mercado, sought them not just to gain a political advantage, but also because they hoped to spread a doctrine of radical liberal nationalism

¹²⁹ José Hilario López, "Mensaje del presidente de la República al congreso constitucional de la Nueva Granada" (Speech, Bogotá, March 1, 1853), 3.

¹³⁰ Sanders, *Contentious Republicans*, 96-97.

amongst plebeians. However, plebeians also influenced the character of the nationalist movements, pushing them to reject not just political tyranny, but social oppression as well. Zamora and Mercado responded to these challenges in different ways. While Zamora radicalized his anti-oligarchy rhetoric politically, he discouraged his troops from making any attempt at social revolution. Mercado, on the other hand, explicitly began to advocate for a social revolution to end the oppression of the poor. During the *Zurriago*, he even supported campesinos radical land seizures from haciendas. As such, while both Mercado and Zamora led similar political projects, Mercado's vision was significantly more radical.

From both Zamora and Mercado's experiences thus emerges a common ideology of radical liberal nationalism. This ideology had varied roots, inspired by enlightenment thought, and, after 1848, Europe's revolutionary experience, particularly that of France and Italy. At the same time, the ideology also drew on a romantic and heroic understanding of the Wars of Independence, and other political movements across Latin America, such as the Ecuadorian Revolution of 1844. Thus, while the ideology drew some inspiration from Europe, it remained distinctly Latin American. Both Zamora and Mercado's versions of the ideology shared a condemnation of the conservative oligarchies that dominated post-colonial Latin America. Using strikingly similar rhetoric, Zamora and Mercado both argued that the political exclusion of plebeians from society, and the tyrannical actions of oligarchs, had weakened feelings of national fraternity, and undermined democracy. Further, both men conceptualized these oligarchies as continuations of the oppression Spanish colonialism, which had to be defeated to facilitate national rebirth. Mercado went so far as to argue the oligarchs were not just individual tyrants, but a class that conspired to exploit the poor, contending that plebeians needed not only expanded political rights, but social rights as well. Across Latin America, radicals were drawn

towards nationalistic projects of social and political reform in an attempt to address the wrongs of post-colonial society.

Closely tied to radical liberal nationalism was plebeian nationalism. Though mediators like Mercado and Zamora may have seen themselves as the proselytizers of nationalism amongst plebeians, in reality it had deep roots in plebeian political culture. As discussed earlier in this study, the Wars of Independence had given rise to a culture of patriotic citizenship amongst plebeians, as they demanded the political freedoms that elites claimed the wars had won. Further, plebeians had long associated citizenship not just with political rights, but with social rights and freedom from oppressive hierarchies as well. This patriotic culture provided a foundation for a revolutionary nationalism emerging alongside liberal victories in the 1840s and 50s that championed plebeians' role as the defenders of the nation against the oligarchy. Further, this nationalism emphasized a radical rejection of the post-colonial social order, and an assault on all institutions and laws that oppressed the poor. This revolutionary spirit shone most clearly in the January Revolution in Venezuela, and the *Zurriago* in Colombia. Plebeian nationalism and plebeian political participation were thus intimately connected.

While there was at time friction between these two nationalist traditions, they by and large existed symbiotically. The powerful motivation that nationalism instilled in plebeians gave radical liberals the support they needed to defeat conservatives at both the ballot box and on the battle field. For the most radical liberals, like Mercado, it also gave them a staunch ally in efforts for social reform. Further, plebeian nationalism fit with the radical liberal program, which actively hoped for the strengthening of feelings of national fraternity to underlie a more democratic society. For plebeians, radical liberal nationalism gave them a set of rhetorical discourses around notions of rights and citizenship that helped them make their arguments for

inclusion. Furthermore, alliances with radicals gave plebeians the opportunity to influence national politics, and to expand their role in the public sphere through institutions like the national guard. In taverns, meeting halls, and plazas, radical liberal and plebeian nationalism were constantly intersecting, their respective proponents discussing and debating, forging a common program.

Both radical liberal and plebeian nationalism were driving forces in a general democratic spring occurring in post-colonial Latin America, centering around the year 1848. Traditional hierarchies, the exclusion of the poor from politics, and social injustices were all challenged by rising liberal opposition to the conservative post-independence turn. The series of events that played out in Venezuela and Colombia at mid-century were monumental, as they saw political and national communities expand to include plebeians, in practice and in law. This more inclusive definition of nationhood was accompanied by the diminished influence of traditional elites, for a time. This democratic spring would contribute to the creation of what James Sanders calls “American Republican Modernity,” a general feeling among Latin American liberal intellectuals and peoples that their region was at the vanguard of world progress and democracy.¹³¹ This study of the ideologies that motivated radical liberals further reveals that “American Republican Modernity,” drew not only from a sense of political progress, but from the idea that Latin America’s republics were finally becoming nations as well.

Not surprising then, is the strong feeling of Pan-Latin Americanism that characterizes the thought of Latin America’s radical liberal nationalists. As noted earlier, Mercado envisaged the social revolution he set out to achieve in Colombia as part of a wider Pan-Latin American effort

¹³¹ Sanders, *The Vanguard of the Atlantic World*, 82.

to reform society. Further, he had been inspired in this vision by his attention to political events across the region, such as the Ecuadorian revolution. This spirit was also evident in López's 1853 speech, as he referenced Colombia's neighbors as sister republics and celebrated the defeat of Juan Manuel de Rosas, "the dictator" in Argentina that same year.¹³² The idea of a mid-century democratic spring in Latin America is thus not merely the retrospective formulation of historians. Plebeians and radicals living through that time perceived it as such. Indeed, it is no accident that it would be during this period that Chilean liberal writer Francisco Bilbao would popularize the phrase "Latin America." While Bilbao had developed the idea in response to the William Walker expedition in Nicaragua, it drew on the general feelings of democratic progress and advancing nationalism that characterized this new, revolutionary era.¹³³

Juan Álvarez and *La Reforma*

The flowering of a democratic spring in Mexico was complicated by the North American invasion in 1846. Before the war had broken out, peasants along Mexico's southern coasts had been engaged in a series of revolts against the conservative, centralist authorities that dominated Mexico City. In 1845, a coup brought the conservative centralist Mariano Paredes to power. Liberals were outraged by the events, some even suspecting Paredes (not without reason) of monarchist sympathies. In April 1846, liberal leaders in the south called for a revolt against the new regime.¹³⁴ In their proclamations, the revolting peasants were already adopting plebeian nationalist rhetoric. The residents of Tlapa declared "Federation or death. Long live America: and death forever to tyranny. The whites, the blacks, and we the Indians, we are all Mexicans," before going on to emphasize that their revolt was not "a caste war," but a protest against high

¹³² López, "Mensaje del presidente de la República al congreso constitucional de la Nueva Granada," 16; 18.

¹³³ Gobat, *Empire by Invitation*, 96.

¹³⁴ Guardino, *Peasants, Politics and the Formation of Mexico's National State*, 157-58.

taxes and tyranny.¹³⁵ Mexican plebeians thus combined nationalist rhetoric with a defense of their autonomy and livelihoods, highlighting the same social aspects of the nation that were highlighted in Colombia. Plebeians asserted that they were equal and patriotic members of the nation, and that this entitled them to protection from economic exploitation.

The peasant revolt was led by the veteran liberal and federalist politician Juan Álvarez. Born into a middle-class mestizo family, Álvarez had participated in every major popular insurrection since the *Grito de Dolores* in 1810, losing both his legs in the Wars of Independence. After the murder of federalist leader Vicente Guerrero in 1831, Álvarez's talent at organizing the indigenous communities of the Pacific coast to resist the centralist turn in government made him the de facto leader of federalism in the region.¹³⁶ This federalist-centralist divide, as identified by historian Peter Guardino, is similar to that which would later emerge in Venezuela and Colombia. Under leaders like Guerrero and Álvarez, federalism came to mean increased economic and political autonomy for plebeians and their communities, alongside lower taxes. Further, just as would be the case in Venezuela and Colombia a decade later, federalists constructed their ideology in opposition to the Mexico City based elite, which was "identified with the continuation of Spanish colonialism."¹³⁷ Thus, many of the political and ideological developments that would characterize the democratic spring of the 1840s and 50s would be pioneered in Mexico across the 1820s and 30s. In his relations with indigenous communities, Álvarez would become one of the first mediators, incorporating plebeians into a popular federalist condition ideologically similar to the movements constructed by radical liberal nationalists like Mercado and Zamora in the next decade.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 147.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 137-38.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 111-12.

The peasant rebellions of 1846 successfully drove Paredes from power and forced a return to federalism. However, the United States' invasion later that year forced a national rapprochement between centralists and federalists and the postponement of plebeian's demands for autonomy. Regardless, the rivalry between the two factions continued to manifest itself in disputes over military strategy. While federalists like Álvarez advocated arming peasants en masse and waging a national guerrilla war, centralists like Santa Anna were disturbed by the potential challenge to the social order such a strategy could pose.¹³⁸ However, as the North Americans began to seize major Mexican cities, communities and local leaders began to take matter into their own hands. In Huatusco, a national appeal was published in response to General Scott's call for surrender, declaring "The Mexican nation, justly indignant, responds with us *war before dishonor: death before disgrace*... Reduced to our natural resources of defense, we will adopt in this struggle the system of guerrillas." (emphasis original)¹³⁹ This popular appeal relies on the same spirit of nationalism as the proclamation of Tlapa a year earlier, calling on plebeians to rise up in the defense of the patria. Further, the reference to "natural resources of defense," emphasizes the continuity between the peasant revolts that preceded the war and the resistance to foreign aggression. In advocating guerrilla war, radical liberals hoped to harness the force of plebeian nationalism to win the war.

Resistance to the North American invasion drew on powerful reservoirs of popular nationalism. One popular song from the Pacific Coast during the war, *El padre nuestro de los yankees, que rezan los mejicanos*, declared that plebeian soldiers were heroes of the patria, whose blood sanctified the nation. However, these appeals carried strong overtones of social

¹³⁸ Ibid., 168-170.

¹³⁹ *Impugnacion del manifiesto que el general en gefe de las fuerzas militares norte-americanas, Dirigio a la nacion mexicana*. Orizava (VER: Impr. de la Caja de Ahorros, 1847), 16.

conflict as well. Later verses in the song said of the North Americans that “They would put taxes on us with the greatest tyranny,” and that “They would take from us our bread.”¹⁴⁰ The North American invaders were identified not just as foreign aggressors, but as social oppressors that sought to limit plebeian’s autonomy. In particular, the focus on taxation reveals how peasants saw the war against the US as a continuation of their revolts against the oligarchy. For plebeians, national liberation meant not just the expulsion of the North American’s but also the dismantlement of social oppression. While the intercession of war may have resulted in a tenuous alliance between centralist and federalist leaders, for the ordinary soldiers it was another reflection of the struggle against the social order.

Conflict between plebeian soldiers and their elite leaders intensified as the fortunes of war increasingly declined. Radicals in San Luis Potosí called for the confiscation of private wealth to support the war effort, condemning the wealthy for their lack of patriotism. When they discovered the government’s plans to make peace, they even mounted an abortive revolt. Other liberal leaders, such as Álvarez, opposed such moves, as they felt they undermined the national unity necessary to prosecute the war.¹⁴¹ However, events were moving too quickly to be controlled. While plebeian soldiers broadly adhered to Álvarez’s calls for unity, social conflict continued. When peasants in the south seized hacienda lands during the war, the National Guards refused to stop them. In other regions, National Guards, militias hastily organized to fight the North Americans, even participated in land seizures!¹⁴² The National Guard, as a natural evolution of the earlier popular mobilizations across the south, carried a distinctly plebeian

¹⁴⁰ Benjamin Vicuña Mackenna, *Páginas De mi diario durante tres años de viajes* (Santiago: Imprenta del Ferrocarril, 1856), 15-16.

¹⁴¹ Guardino, *The Dead March*, 303-304.

¹⁴² Guardino, *Peasants, Politics and the Formation of Mexico’s National State*, 204; 191.

character. Despite the efforts of their leaders, the stamp that those earlier revolts had left on the soldiers' political consciousnesses could not be fully removed, as they repeatedly used their positions to attack elite power and wealth. This, however, does not constitute a rejection of the nation on the part of plebeians. Rather, plebeians contended that the domestic oligarchy, which had undermined feelings of national fraternity by exploiting the poor, was no less hostile to the nation than the North Americans.

After the war ended in 1848, the continuing threat of plebeian radicalism forced the weakened national government to make concessions to the peasants and radical liberals of the south. Álvarez took advantage of the moment to press the long-standing federalist demand that a new state, Guerrero, be formed along the south coast. Forming a coalition with indigenous communities and the veterans of the peasant revolts and North American invasion, Álvarez gained the necessary popular support to form the new state in 1849. The new state legislature quickly passed laws responding to a litany of plebeian complaints, lowering taxes and establishing universal male suffrage. Further, in recognition of plebeian nationalism, the state constitution recognized the right of “acción popular” against traitors to the republic.¹⁴³ The more democratic environment in the new state allowed even more radical ideas to begin entering the political sphere. In 1851, an unnamed individual entered the state and began arguing for a “social and political constitution,” and other ideas collectively labeled “socialism” by the local paper.¹⁴⁴ As occurred in Colombia and Venezuela, the democratizing political atmosphere of the 1840s brought the social demands of plebeians to the fore. These social demands met a receptive audience of radical liberals who hoped for social reform, or even revolution.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 173-75.

¹⁴⁴ *La aurora del sur* (Guerrero), January 3, 1851, 3.

This democratic opening was brought to a crashing end in 1852, as a conservative rebellion broke out that returned Santa Anna to power. Like the old centralists, the conservatives hoped to strengthen the power of the central government and end federalism once and for all. They also hoped to limit popular political participation once more and reinstate the hated pre-war taxes. Even more disturbing to plebeians and radicals alike, the new conservative movement carried a distinct monarchist tinge. Santa Anna was referred to as “His Serene Highness,” and the government elevated Iturbide over Hidalgo and Guerrero as the true hero of independence. The sudden whirlwind of reaction, however, would fail to fundamentally alter the base of Mexican society. For decades, plebeians had engaged in politics by forming alliances with mediators like Álvarez. Furthermore, they had carried arms in defense of their nation both in popular revolts against the oligarchy and against foreign invasions, and in so doing had come to view themselves as patriots. While the conservatives could take from plebeians their legal place in the nation, they could not take from them their lived experiences as *ciudadanos*. Thus, rather than reordering society, the conservatives solely managed to provoke another uprising against, in Álvarez’s words, the “privileged classes... which feed on their [the people’s] blood.”¹⁴⁵

Determined to reclaim their rights, plebeians and radical liberals in Guerrero joined together and issued the Plan of Ayutla in 1854. The plan harshly condemned the monarchist pretensions and autocratic centralism of the Santa Anna regime, while demanding the nation be reconstituted as “a popular representative republic.” In other documents distributed by the rebels, the conservatives were denounced for their “oligarchic” character, and argued the rebellion was a defense of “independence.” The rhetoric of the Ayutla revolutionaries, though separated in space and time from their counterparts in Venezuela and Colombia, was remarkably similar. The

¹⁴⁵ Guardino, *Peasants, Politics and the Formation of Mexico’s National State*, 180-2.

popular federalists fought to unseat the post-colonial oligarchy, which suffocated the nation through repression and exclusion. Equally, they conceived of the struggle as a continuation of the Wars of Independence, and their promise of an inclusive nation-state. Álvarez made this nationalist appeal explicit, declaring that the revolution would make “the division between brothers disappear.”¹⁴⁶ The intersection between plebeian and radical liberal nationalisms made the Ayutla Revolution possible, providing an ideology based around an inclusive and popular conception of both the nation and democracy, and the promise of social reform. This fusion of the two nationalisms was achieved by the mediator, Álvarez, who performed the quotidian work to organize a broad coalition, negotiating between the demands of popular sectors and the exigencies of the national situation, forging a common program. Across the Americas, it was these nationalist coalitions that were fundamentally reshaping the post-colonial order.

One of the unique aspects about Mexican nationalism in this period, and in Latin America in general, was that it relied as much on ideas of the future as the past. Of course, as has been noted above, both radical liberal and plebeian nationalisms relied on popular conceptions of a history of shared struggle against oppression going back to the Wars of Independence. Equally, nationalist appeals often relied on a heroic memory of the triumphs of independence and its protagonists. However, even as plebeians and radicals both celebrated the heroism of Hidalgo or Bolívar, there was always a critical undercurrent, as they observed that popular aspirations for autonomy and inclusion were not achieved after independence. Thus, the Wars of Independence were not seen as a glorious past to return to, but rather as a broken promise. In answer to the popular feeling that the Wars of Independence had been left unfinished, new nationalist movements, centered around mediators, arose to take up the fallen banner. The new movements

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 184-85.

created spaces where intellectuals and plebeians could share their ideas for what the nation ought to become and create plans for wide reaching political and social reform. This nationalism, orientated towards the renovation of the nation, thus relied more than anything on plebeian's and radical's ideas of what the future should bring, rather than any notion of the past. Predicting the contradictions that independence would bring, Simón Bolívar had warned that "A great volcano lies at our feet. Who shall restrain the oppressed classes?"¹⁴⁷ By 1854, it was clear that no one could.

Over the rest of 1854 and through 1855, the popular revolt, fought as a guerrilla war, spread out from Guerrero across the rest of Mexico. By the summer of 1855, Santa Anna's support had evaporated, and the revolt of several military garrisons forced him into exile. After political maneuvering within the rebel camp, it was decided that Álvarez would assume the presidency. Later in the year, he entered into Mexico City in triumph, alongside his barefoot plebeian soldiers. But, even at this hour of triumph, divisions began to emerge in the Federalist leadership. Many elites within the coalition were disturbed at the sight of armed plebeians occupying the capital. Indeed, as Guy Thomson notes, the Ayutla Revolution was "a victory for the periphery over the center," which took mediator-based politics and coalitions to the national level. Some wealthy liberals even feared that Álvarez and his "barbarian" followers could ignite a caste war.¹⁴⁸ The fracturing of the triumphant Ayutla coalition provides one of the first clear examples of the limitations of mediator politics. Radical liberal mediators could build powerful revolutionary movements for political and social reform within their own regions, coming to dominate local politics. However, at the level of the national party, their projects were always

¹⁴⁷ Richard Graham, *Independence in Latin America: Contrasts and Comparisons* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2013), 6.

¹⁴⁸Guardino, *Peasants, Politics and the Formation of Mexico's National State*, 188-90.

contested by their moderate (and more elite) colleagues who recoiled at the thought of social revolution. As nationalist coalitions increasingly empowered plebeians, elites, conservative and liberal alike, grew evermore disquieted at the rising revolutionary tide.

Amidst these divisions, Álvarez's presidency would ultimately flounder. The press constantly criticized him for his association with the indigenous and afro-descendant plebeians in the south, and his radical views on social injustices. Even within his own cabinet, moderates and radicals were constantly feuding, and challenging his capacity to govern. Eventually, disillusioned by politics in the capital, Álvarez resigned in December of 1856 and returned to Guerrero.¹⁴⁹ However, Álvarez's retreat from the national stage did not end the scrutiny of him and his alliances with popular forces. In 1857, the Spaniard Bermejillo went before the Spanish chargé d'affaires in Mexico to complain about Álvarez's conduct as president. In particular, he accused Álvarez of failing to respond to a series of attacks on Spanish owned haciendas in Morelos. He further alleged that Álvarez's own soldiers had participated in the attacks, having been encouraged by his anti-Spanish rhetoric.¹⁵⁰ In response, Álvarez published his "Manifiesto of *Ciudadano* Juan Álvarez: To the cultured peoples of Europe and America," in the hope of fulfilling his duty to "my patria, my dignity, and my conscience."¹⁵¹

The manifiesto, though framed as a defense of Álvarez's conduct, provides a clear example of radical liberal nationalist rhetoric, and its analysis of the problems facing postcolonial Latin America. In Álvarez's view, the crisis facing Mexico was not plebeian discontent, but a corrupt social order that produced "the misery that devours the peoples of

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 189.

¹⁵⁰ Juan Álvarez, *Manifiesto del ciudadano Juan Álvarez: A los pueblos cultos de Europa y América* (1857), 304-306.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 303.

Guerrero, destroyed by the devastating hand of the tyrant.” This misery was provoked by “the enemies of liberty,” those who wanted “to enslave again the people.” Álvarez identified the oppression of plebeians by elites as the barrier to stable nationhood and democracy. In his view, hostile elites and their unceasing attempts to maintain their power and wealth had repeatedly threatened “public order.” In contrast, his “movement of five-thousand southerners” had served “to sustain the administration of Ayutla, combatting tyranny and its proselytes.” Similar to Mercado and Zamora, Álvarez argued that while elites undermined popular governments in the name of “order,” plebeians had proved themselves the true defenders of the nation by repeatedly rallying to its defense. In doing so, plebeians had proved themselves the true heirs of the democratic and nationalist spirit of independence. As Álvarez reproached those who criticized the class composition of his movement, “I have arrived here, to be with the loyal forces... that support the present administration, emanation of the regenerating plan of Ayutla.”¹⁵²

Álvarez’s opposition to elite efforts at social control was linked to his belief that the hierarchies and institutions of Spanish colonialism still held sway over much of Mexico. Álvarez, denying that his soldiers had participated in the attacks on the haciendas, argued that their “true crime... is that they defended liberty: they tried to defeat that kind of feudalism, established by Bermejillo and other Spaniards... the center of the crimes and evils are the same haciendas, almost in their totality.”¹⁵³ Álvarez thus identified the root cause of violence and instability as the country side as the persistence of colonial feudalism. In Morelos, Spanish hacendados continued to dominate economic and political life decades after independence, leading to what Álvarez saw as inevitable social conflict. Further, Álvarez condemned how the

¹⁵² Ibid., 312-13.

¹⁵³ Ibid., 318.

Spanish hacendados in Morelos interfered in national politics. Bermejillo and other hacendados had “mixed themselves in the politics of the country... they continued to be the disturbers of the public peace...” provoking popular anger against them.¹⁵⁴ The persistence of Spanish influence over the country tainted economic and political life, especially as it attempted to prop up conservative resistance to programs of nationalist reform.

Álvarez saw the conflict between Spaniards and Mexicans in Morelos as part of a larger historic struggle between the aspiring nation and a tyrannical empire. As he declared, “What do the Spaniards bring when they come to the New World? Where do they work their fortunes to enjoy in their native land?... we are the offended.”¹⁵⁵ Bermejillo and his fellow hacendados were part of the long stream of Spaniards, who had, since Cortés, exploited Mexico’s people and resources for their own benefit. Considering this, Álvarez could understand and defend the anger that drove peasants’ attacks on the Spanish hacendados, crying “that the peoples raise their voice and their clamors against the properties of the Spaniards in their majority, it is because they usurp their lands and exercise a feudalism as or crueller than that enthroned in the times of royal life.” Across Colombia, Venezuela, and Mexico, the perception of the lingering pernicious influence of Spanish colonialism was a key element of both radical liberal and plebeian nationalism. However, in Mexico, the continued existence of a significant and visible class of Spanish hacendados in the country gave plebeians and radicals a clear target for their anger, justified or not, intensifying the anti-colonial aspects of nationalism. This powerful anti-colonialism drove social radicalism, as plebeians attacked Spanish haciendas, and radicals

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 329.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 328.

argued it was the fault of the Spanish for oppressing their workers. Social revolution was seen as necessary to bring the colonial exploitation of Mexico to a final end.

While the Spanish hacendados were the particular target of Álvarez's anger, he also criticized haciendas as inherently oppressive institutions. Commenting on the haciendas in Morelos, Álvarez stated that "The hacendados, their majority... trade and enrich with the miserable sweat of the unhappy worker: they bind them like slaves." Álvarez saw a relationship of class exploitation between hacendados and their workers, as the masters used debt and other coercive measures to trap workers on the hacienda. Having trapped their workforce, hacendados then exploited the peasants mercilessly, enriching themselves while leaving the workers in grinding poverty. Furthermore, Álvarez noted how the hacendados' constant desire to expand their haciendas victimized indigenous communities and small farmers. "Some hacendados... slowly take possession, now of the lands of individuals, now of the ejidos and those of the community... without presenting a legal title."¹⁵⁶ Worsening the situation, the political influence of the hacendados ensured that "persecution and incarceration is what is given as a prize to those who reclaim what is theirs."¹⁵⁷ Álvarez identified that the impositions of the land-holding class on the peasantry naturally resulted in resistance and social conflict. His obvious sympathy for the peasantry in this struggle, even for radical actions like land reclamations, demonstrates once again the powerful strain of social radicalism that permeated radical liberal nationalism in Mexico.

At the core of both radical liberals and plebeian nationalists' cries for social change was the demand for autonomy. Indeed, it is notable that Álvarez, Mercado, and Zamora were all

¹⁵⁶ While ejidos in Colombia were public common lands, in Mexico ejidos were indigenous communal lands, more similar to the resguardos in Colombia.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 328.

passionate federalists. Federalism, at its core, was an ideology of opposition to centralized state power, in favor of empowering local communities to decide their own fates. Federalism also had an inclusive view of citizenship, which hoped to expand the limits of suffrage to include all men (though not women). Further, for the most radical federalists, it also entailed the defense of the poor not just against state impositions, but exploitation by wealthy hacendados as well. These radicals recognized that as long as the masses were economically subjugated by the oligarchy, any attempt at expanding political freedoms would be smothered within the confines of the haciendas. Radical liberals' hope for social change dovetailed with plebeians' understandings of autonomy. Ever since national independence, plebeians had seen their personal independence eroded, as the haciendas usurped their lands and prohibited them from accessing common resources, forcing them to choose between starvation or submission. Equally, conservative governments had forced heavy taxes upon them, while simultaneously denying them the rights of citizenship. Facing this assault on their rights, plebeians across Latin America joined political movements in the hope that they could recuperate their lands and win new political rights. The radical liberal and plebeian nationalist coalitions coalesced around the demand of autonomy.

However, Álvarez's retreat from the national scene ensured that these radical projects for autonomy would remain a parochial force in politics, in a tenuous alliance with the liberal reformers now coming to power in Mexico City. The accession of the moderate liberal Ignacio Comonfort to the presidency after Álvarez's resignation marked the beginning of *La Reforma* (The Reform). Seen today as the foundation of the modern Mexican nation-state, *La Reforma* saw the implementation of a series of top-down reforms which liberals hoped would end the colonial corporatist order of society. The *Ley Juárez* abolished the legal corporate *fueros* (rights), that entitled the church and military to separate courts and legal privileges. Meanwhile, the *Ley*

Lerdo abolished corporate ownership of the land. While the law targeted the church's significant holdings in Mexico, it also targeted the village lands and ejidos of indigenous peoples. Thus, while *La Reforma* did strike at the power of the conservative oligarchy, it did little, and in some ways further compromised, the autonomy of plebeians. It was during this elitist turn in government that elections would be held for a congress to draft a new constitution for Mexico.¹⁵⁸

However, as Peter Guardino notes, the ultimate transformation of *La Reforma* into a liberal and centralist project "was not by any means a foregone conclusion." Radical liberals and federalists fought for their vision of the nation to be represented in its fundamental law.¹⁵⁹ In one speech to the congress, radical lawyer and writer Ignacio Ramírez criticized those who saw the Mexican nation as homogenous, "the mixed race extends itself across all parts, and we will find a hundred nations that in vain we will try today to mix into one." Ramírez, while a nationalist, recognized that indigenous peoples had long preserved their "nationality independent and glorious," against oppression and exploitation. Indigenous peoples had even preserved their languages, "that the Bishop Zumárraga could not burn, nor the sword of the conquistador destroy." Considering the indigenous people's centuries-long struggle for autonomy, Ramírez argued that they could only be incorporated into the nation on the basis of respect for their traditions and cultures. "Do you want to form a stable division of national territory...? Elevate the indigenous to the sphere of *ciudadanos*... but begin to divide them by languages."¹⁶⁰

Contrary to the more common strains of nationalism of the time, which sought to elevate national identity over any communal or ethnic association, Ramírez took a federalist approach to the

¹⁵⁸ Guardino, *Peasants, Politics and the Formation of Mexico's National State*, 189-90; 194.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 194.

¹⁶⁰ Francisco Zarco, *Crónica del congreso extraordinario constituyente* (México: Secretaria De Gobernación, 1979), 233. Bishop Zumárraga was the first bishop of colonial Mexico.

nation. In his view, increasing indigenous communities' autonomy, while simultaneously elevating them to full citizenship, would do more to win their patriotic commitment than any effort at coercive homogenization.

Ramírez also appealed for the rights of workers to be respected by the constitution. Like many radicals, he condemned haciendas as representing “the feudalism of the middle ages...” noting how “chains bound him [the worker] to the soil.” However, Ramírez went further, as he tied the hierarchical and exploitative structure of the hacienda to the conditions of the nascent urban working class. Just as the peon had been exploited over the ages by the aristocracy, “today one finds the slave of capital... today the worker is the cane one squeezes and abandons.” Observing the landscape of the incipient industrial age, he declared that “the great, the true social problem, is to emancipate the laborers from the capitalists.” Since it was the workers who produced the profit for capitalists, Ramírez argued they were entitled to a share of it, a principle he called “socialism.” This redistribution of wealth was necessary to allow workers to gain financial stability, educate their families, and “to exercise the rights of a *ciudadano*.”¹⁶¹ While utopian in nature, Ramírez’s critique of emerging industrial capitalism placed him at the most radical edge of contemporary liberal thought in Latin America. His analysis of the oppressive class relationship between worker and boss is intertwined with an argument that a lack of economic autonomy erodes an individual’s political rights. Capitalism, and the social hierarchies it produced, were thus seen as a threat to democratic nationhood, to be combatted through egalitarian social reforms.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 234.

Following Ramírez's speech, José María Castillo Velasco rose to speak for the rights of municipalities. While stating his agreement with the social reforms proposed by Ramírez, Castillo felt that the delegates had largely failed to address the demands of communities for political autonomy. Ever since their establishment with the adoption of the Cádiz Constitution as part of the Three Guarantees, self-governing municipalities had provided Mexican plebeians the opportunity to participate directly in the government of their communities, allowing them to exercise the rights of *ciudadanos*. Municipalities further offered plebeians a "link to the idea and praxis of the nation-state." However, many deputies at the 1856 congress were advocating a return to the 1824 constitution, which had limited the number and powers of municipalities.¹⁶² As Castillo pointed out in a later speech defending the right of the Federal District to form a municipality, limitations on the autonomy of communities and municipalities were contrary to federalism. Though the district wanted "to elects its own authorities..." and "the liberty of municipal power," it had long suffered under the "tyrannical and despotic" direct rule of the central government.¹⁶³ Municipalities thus represented radical liberals longstanding commitment to the democratization of politics at the local level. Further, this democratization was deeply tied with projects of social reform, another deputy commenting on Castillo's "desire to give lands to the Indians."¹⁶⁴ Radical liberals, who had long fought the centralizing, conservative state under the banner of the popular will, hoped to strengthen the nation through expanding communal, rather than state, power.

¹⁶² Ibid., 235.

Guardino, *Peasants, Politics and the Formation of Mexico's National State*, 87; 94.

¹⁶³ Zarco, *Crónica del Congreso extraordinario constituyente*, 927.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 241.

Logically then, radicals argued that popular action rather than strict constitutional delineations would provide the strongest defense against potential abuses of state power. While discussing the “Rights of Man” enumerated by the constitution, one deputy argued that the duty of citizens to defend the constitution should not be included. The deputy was concerned that, since the constitution did not specify “the means that subaltern authorities should adopt for this defense, as such resistance is extremely dangerous.” Ponciano Arriaga, one of the leaders of resistance to the North Americans in San Luis Potosi, responded “where there is passive obedience, liberty ends.” In keeping with radical liberalism’s belief in the patriotic commitment of plebeians, Arriaga exclaimed “Hopefully... all the citizens rise up like a single man believing that an attack on the guarantees of an individual is an attack on the whole society!”¹⁶⁵ Rather than seeing the relationship between state and citizen as top-down and hierarchical, radicals argued that citizens had a right, even duty, to oppose an oppressive government. The *ciudadanos*, rather than the legislature or army, were the ultimate source of the state’s legitimacy, and the true caretakers of the constitutional order. Radical notions of republicanism were thus heavily influenced by notions of direct democracy, emphasizing that ultimately the republic could only be sustained by the dedication of the masses.

Ignacio Ramírez rose next, to criticize the constitution for only speaking of the “rights of man.” The constitution “forgets the social rights of the woman... it does not think on her emancipation nor give her political functions... in matrimony the woman is equal to the man and has rights to demand that the law should assure her.” While short of calling for women’s suffrage, Ramírez’s assertion of women’s fundamental equality is among the most radical declarations of the congress. Ramírez’s belief in expanding women’s rights was tied to his

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 248-9.

perception of the relationship between social and political ill. “Before thinking on the organization of public powers, one must attend to the good order of the family... the case is that many unfortunates are beaten by their husbands. This is so shameful in a civilized people...” A parallel is drawn between the despotic rule of an abusive husband over his house, and the impositions of a tyrant over the nation. The expansion of women’s political and social rights thus was framed as necessary for the preservation of democracy. Equally, Ramírez argued for “the rights of the children, the orphans, the natural children... some ancient codes lasted for centuries because they protected... all the weak and needy, and it is necessary that today constitutions have the same objective.”¹⁶⁶ While paternalistic in nature, Ramírez had proposed a radical series of social rights meant to erode all forms of oppression in society, whether based on gender or social position. It was only through these expanded social rights that political liberty for all could finally be realized.

Throughout the course of the congress, radical liberals and federalists proposed a new vision for the Mexican nation. The expansive project of reform they proposed encompassed women’s rights, indigenous peoples’ autonomy, land reform, labor rights, and municipal self-government. More than a political project, these reforms constituted a bottom-up approach to nation construction, in opposition to traditional state driven nation-building. Rather than using the rewards and punishments the state could offer to coerce plebeians into loyalty to the national project, radicals sought instead to meet their long-standing demands for autonomy. The basis for the nation was not expanded state power, but the political force of plebeian nationalism, which had provided the motivating force for the Revolution of Ayutla and the initiation of *La Reforma* in the first place. This form of nation-building was thus a manifestation of mediator politics on

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 249-50.

the national level, as it drew on the programs and organizations that had been developed by the radical liberal-plebeian coalitions during the revolts of the preceding decades. While this vision for the nation would ultimately not triumph at the constitutional congress, it would be the vision that would motivate plebeian resistance during the tumultuous decade to come. Ignacio Ramírez summarized this hope most aptly, arguing “The Mexican nation cannot organize itself with elements of the old political science, for they are the expression of slavery and worry... let us form a constitution founded upon the privilege of the needy, of the ignorant, of the weak...”¹⁶⁷

These principles would not come to be the basis of the new constitution, as they met increasing opposition from moderate liberals and conservatives at the congress. Landowners issued pamphlets and gave speeches against the radicals, criticizing them for what they perceived as an assault on property rights.¹⁶⁸ Ultimately the more powerful landowners won out in the debates, and the constitution would shed most radical influence, though it would establish universal male suffrage.¹⁶⁹ Regardless of its comparatively moderate character, the constitution enraged conservatives. In 1857 the conservatives, hoping to preserve the corporate system, led a coup against the moderate Comonfort presidency, initiating a civil war between the two parties, the War of the Reform. Benito Juárez, the President of the Supreme Court, ascended to the Presidency and led the liberals to victory by 1860. However, in 1861, at the invitation of the Conservatives and using Juárez government’s suspension of payment of foreign debts as a justification, Napoleon III of France convinced Britain and Spain to join him in an invasion of Mexico. However, by 1862, the British and Spanish, realizing that France had designs to conquer

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 235.

¹⁶⁸ Guardino, *Peasants, Politics and the Formation of Mexico’s National State*, 199-201.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 189.

all Mexico and impose a monarchy, withdrew. Faced with the prospect of imperial conquest, Mexican radicals and plebeians resolved to fight a war of national liberation.

The radical newspaper, *La Chinaca* (The Plebe), began publishing during this critical period. Its pages, besides being filled with radical liberal and plebeian nationalist rhetoric, provide a window into how plebeians engaged with and understood their nation. For example, as James Sanders notes, the paper's initial masthead depicts a group of men, women, and children in peasant dress gathered around a man reading a newspaper aloud, demonstrating how even the illiterate excitedly engaged with politics.¹⁷⁰ A later masthead depicts a peasant, clutching a newspaper, giving a speech to a small crowd gathered around him, which watches with rapt attention.¹⁷¹ The image shows the political agency of plebeians, as they gathered in small groups and clubs, discussing the news and hearing speeches. The masthead evolved further the following year. On the left side of the image, plebeians gather to hear a newspaper read aloud, as they had in the previous mastheads. But at the center, an excited crowd of soldiers and civilians gathers around a man in middle-class dress, a mediator, speaking impassioned, perhaps relating recent military victories.¹⁷² The evolving mastheads of *La Chinaca* effectively demonstrate the quotidian methods of nation-building that characterized mid-19th century Latin America. Gatherings of plebeians in public spaces provided not just a platform for political activism, but a place for *ciudadanos* of all backgrounds to gather to show their support for the national cause. It was through these gatherings that plebeians articulated and experienced their notion of the inclusive patria.

¹⁷⁰ Sanders, *The Vanguard of the Atlantic World*, 14.

¹⁷¹ *La Chinaca*, August 14, 1862, 1.

¹⁷² *La Chinaca*, April 3, 1863, 1.



Figure 1: See footnote 170



Figure 2: See footnote 171



Figure 3: See footnote 172

Besides its articles, *La Chinaca* also published patriotic poetry and songs, meant to bolster popular enthusiasm in the war against the French. Among the poems that the paper published was *El Chinaco*, a patriotic ode to the plebeian soldiers who fought the French. The first verses describe how the plebeian, Juan, leaves his small village and loving mother, crossing great distances to join the armies of the Republic. These sacrifices were necessary, as “for the patria, he is going to fight.” Though he risks death, “he will sleep/in the arms of his patria/like a nuptial bed.”¹⁷³ This short poem encapsulates radicals’ views on plebeians and their place in their nation. Plebeians were romanticized as selfless defenders of the nation, who despite having little, gave everything in the service of the national cause. The valorization of the plebeian, a common trope of radical liberal nationalism, was a product of mediator politics. Radicals, having

¹⁷³ "El Chinaco." *La Chinaca*, September 4, 1862, 4.

long worked alongside plebeians to forge political movements and mount revolts in the name of the nation, saw their heroism and sacrifice first hand. Over time, this image of the patriotic plebeian, in arms to defend his patria, became the representative of the revolutionary nation in its struggle against tyranny and imperialism.

The poetry and articles of *La Chinaca* were further imbued with ideas of pan-Latin Americanism and democratic progress. The poem *Cancion de Guerra* [sic], War Song, relates how “The genius of Europe/With a vandal troop/nears the city/... Holy liberty/ Defends the new world.”¹⁷⁴ France’s intervention was seen not just as an attack on Mexico, but an attack on all the Americas. The conflict was thus a confrontation between the democratic forces of Latin America, defended by liberty, and the despotic armies of European imperialism. Further, the term “new world,” took on a new meaning. Rather than signifying the European discovery of the Americas, the “new world” signified the vitality and democracy of Latin America’s republics, while the aged monarchies of Europe desperately hoped to crush. As another poem, *¡Alerta!!*, warned “The tyrants defame/The world of Columbus/The mud of their thrones/Soaks our fronts/With torrential blood/One will erase the stain.”¹⁷⁵ Under the threat of foreign invasion, Mexicans saw themselves as defending not only their own nation, but all of Latin America.

Analyses of the transatlantic “Age of Revolutions” generally assume that the victory of Latin American independence marked the end of any transatlantic revolutionary experience. In reality however, Latin Americans continued to perceive their revolutionary experience as tied to the European well into the 1860s. In an article entitled *Italia y Mexico* [sic], the author felt that

¹⁷⁴ "Cancion De Guerra." [sic] *La Chinaca*, May 1, 1862, 4.

¹⁷⁵ "¡Alerta!!" *La Chinaca*, July 10, 1862, 4.

“What happened at the beginning of 1848 seems that it is going to repeat itself at the end of 1862...” The author continued on, arguing that the conflict between the Italian Revolutionaries, led by Garibaldi, and Victor Emmanuelle II, would inevitably draw France into Italy. Mexico should thus support Garibaldi, as “the cause of Italy is identified in the cause of Mexico. – Let Garibaldi march on Rome and Louis Napoleon will tremble on his throne.”¹⁷⁶ The respective struggles for nationhood of Mexico and Italy were thus conceptualized as related in both nature and outcome. The Revolutions of 1848, themselves playing out on both sides of the Atlantic, had helped rekindle what James Sanders calls “The Atlantic Imagination,” the idea of Latin American revolutionaries fighting alongside their European counterparts for the revindication of democracy.¹⁷⁷ In the minds of revolutionaries, if not of historians “The Age of Revolutions” extended long after Ayacucho.

Though it would be several years before the French were finally defeated in Mexico, the nation had already been fundamentally transformed politically and socially. While Mexico had not experienced a general democratic opening in 1848 as had Venezuela and Colombia, it had been the theater of almost unbroken social struggle and contestation. Since the peasants of Guerrero and Juan Álvarez rose up in 1846 against Mariano Paredes, they had fought both foreign invasions and centralist elites in an effort to reshape the Mexican nation. This process culminated the Revolution of Ayutla, and the drafting of a new constitution. While ultimately over the course of the constitutional congress, it would be the liberal centralists who would triumph in promulgating their vision of Mexico’s future, plebeian and radical liberal nationalism would remain active at the margins of the Mexican state. Peter Guardino argued that the

¹⁷⁶ "Mexico y Italia." [sic] *La Chinaca*, September 30, 1862, 2.

¹⁷⁷ Sanders, *The Vanguard of the Atlantic World*, 136.

intervention of Mexico's plebeians into *La Reforma* was critical in reshaping the Mexican state, that "Mexico's peasantry had refused to be excluded from the polity and in doing so had changed Mexican history."¹⁷⁸ However, perhaps plebeians most enduring contribution is not the effect they had on the Mexican state, but that they helped shape a revolutionary conception of the Mexican nation, which challenged the state to break with the legacies of colonialism, and forge a new order based on autonomy and equality.

This revolutionary vision of the nation is, in many ways, unique to Latin America. While at the beginning of this study the influence of the revolutionary ideology of the French Jacobins over Latin America was noted, it is vital to recognize the difference between the two Jacobin traditions. France's Jacobins were firm centralists, who sought to concentrate all power in Paris and the Convention. Indeed, the Jacobins brutally crushed the Federalists when they revolted in 1793. Zamora, Mercado, and Álvarez, on the other hand, all were or would become Federalists. The divergence between the two traditions has at its core Latin America's unique historical situation. Ever since the Wars of Independence, Latin American radicals had fought against concentrated power, whether in the hands of a Viceroy, or in the hands of the post-independence oligarchy. In this fight, as they increasingly drew closer to plebeians and learned from their conceptions of the nation, the radicals became convinced that their goals could not be achieved by expanding state power, but by limiting it in order to allow the nation to be constructed from the bottom-up. Federalism thus became more than just a way of organizing the state, it represented a rejection of social injustice and political elitism, and a belief in the right of the masses to decide their own fates.

¹⁷⁸ Guardino, *Peasants, Politics and the Formation of Mexico's National State*, 210.

Ultimately, while *La Reforma* may have established the basis of the modern Mexican state, its legacy for the Mexican nation is far more complex. By the end of the civil and international wars of the 1850s and 60s, Juárez and his coterie of elite liberals were firmly ensconced in power, along with their vision of a powerful central state, presaging the *Porfiriato*. This vision had little place in it for the socially and politically radical projects of plebeians and their mediator allies. At the same time, the victory of *La Reforma*, and indeed its very initiation in Ayutla, had been entirely underwritten by the blood, sacrifice, and effort of those same plebeians and mediators who had fought for an opposed concept of the nation. Though federalism and popular nationalisms were banished to the margins of the state, they survived even through the *Porfiriato* where they continued to champion popular rights against encroaching state power.¹⁷⁹ The ultimate result of *La Reforma* then, is that state and nation were perhaps permanently divorced from one another, the state becoming the enemy of plebeians, the nation a symbol of hope for the eventual reclamation of their rights.

Conclusion: Nations, States, and Popular Rights

The journey from independence to nationhood for Latin America was a tumultuous one. The outburst of popular hope and aspirations that followed the downfall of three centuries of Spanish colonialism soon was overtaken by the conservative post-independence turn of the 1830s. However, even as the state grew more authoritarian and centralist in character, at the edges of its power plebeians and radicals continued to organize to redeem their vision of independence for all. In Venezuela, Ezequiel Zamora and his llanero allies rose up against the conservative oligarchy, challenging its restrictive notions of citizenship, setting in motion a chain

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 218-19.

of events that would ultimately end conservative rule in January 1848. In Colombia, the accession of José Hilario López to the presidency in 1849 gave Ramón Mercado and other revolutionaries the opportunity to advocate their own radical vision of the nation. In public plazas and in the meetings of the Democratic Societies, plebeians and radicals worked together to craft a vision of social and political revolution to free the exploited masses, and successfully defended that vision against conservative revolt in 1851. All of these political projects shared a core opposition to the persistence of colonial hierarchies after independence and a dedication to a more inclusive nation.

In reaction to the conservative turn after independence, across Latin America two ideologies of resistance arose: radical liberal and plebeian nationalism. It was these ideologies that guided post-colonial liberal political movements. Plebeian nationalism, growing out of popular participation in and understanding of the Wars of Independence, asserted plebeians' political and social rights against the conservative "oligarchies" intent on usurping those rights. Meanwhile, radical liberal nationalism theorized that the Spanish colonial social and political orders had been preserved by the rise of the conservative "oligarchy," which had prevented the new republics from achieving nationhood. These two ideologies were brought together into powerful political movements through the figures of the mediators. Zamora, Mercado, and Álvarez, all from provincial and middle-class backgrounds, exemplified the role of mediators. Through speeches, discussions, and proclamations, each man won the support of revolutionary plebeians by condemning the exploitation of the poor by the wealthy, and by offering a vision of social reform and expansive citizenship rights. As plebeians became increasingly important to the survival of the radical liberal cause, they made their own influence felt on liberal projects, as proposals for social reform escalated into cries of social revolution. Mediator politics, and the

revolutionary nationalism that drove them, thus proved a powerful challenge to Latin America's post-colonial status quo.

Mediator politics, with its emphasis on principles local autonomy and social rights, thus constituted a uniquely Latin American form of nation-building. The political coalitions that formed between middle-class radicals and plebeians proved to be vehicles for revolutionary projects that sought to restructure post-colonial society to be more equal, creating a stronger sense of popular nationhood. Aside from their political goals, as the coalitions members faced the challenges of elections, revolutions, and civil wars, they were increasingly drawn together by feelings of shared struggle, creating a powerful feeling of national fraternity. While none of these coalitions ever achieved lasting national political power, they were able to reshape their own regions, and transferred their beliefs in the redemptive power of nationalism to plebeians across the nation. The uniqueness of this form of nation-building thus lies in its reliance on the initiative and organization of provincial actors and communities, rather than force of state power. Indeed, the nation was often constructed in direct opposition to the state, as plebeians' nationalism were used to justify revolt against the central government. The revolutionary Latin American nation thus came to represent the revolt of the village plaza against the national palace.

Latin America's postcolonial revolutionary experience formed a part of a broader trans-Atlantic era of revolutions. The participants of the January Revolution in Venezuela and the electoral campaign of José Hilario López in Colombia saw their political movements as linked to the Revolutions of 1848 in Europe. Just as 1848 was seen as "the springtime of nations" in Europe, Latin Americans saw their own *primavera de los pueblos* unfold across that tumultuous year. This democratizing wave would extend into the 1850s and 60s, as the Revolution of Ayutla and the subsequent conflicts saw the ultimate triumph of Mexico's liberals over the

conservatives. However, even as Latin American radicals acknowledged the inspiration they found in the European revolutionary experience, their ideologies maintained a distinctly Latin American character. Rather than simply transplant European notions of liberalism and to the Americas, Latin Americans developed their own conceptions of democracy, based on broad suffrage, respect for local autonomy, and expanded social rights for the poor. This vision of a radical democracy was developed in direct response to the perceived persistence of colonial hierarchies and oppressions after independence, rather than based upon European political theory. The principles of democracy, plebeian nationalism, and social revolution established in this era have left a deep imprint on the Latin American political consciousness and resurfaced in the pivotal events of the 20th century, such as the Mexican Revolution.

The cries of Latin Americans' for democratic and social revolution remain as stirring today as they were in 1848. The radical visions of democracy that grew in the streets and meeting halls of rural Colombia, Venezuela, and Mexico throughout the 19th century bear little relation to the exclusive and restrictive visions advocated by elites, then and now. The democracy that plebeians and middle-class mediators built was a communal one. It was shaped by the active participation of the poor in politics, as they asserted their demands for the rights of *ciudadanos*. This organic, communal democracy, sprouting from the spontaneous genius of the masses, gave birth to a federalist concept of the nation, where far-flung communities and localities were bound together not by the centralized state but by a shared commitment to upholding popular rights. These systems, of communal and federal democracy, distinctly Latin American in character, constitute significant contributions to the development of democracy across the world. Unfortunately, these contributions have long been obscured by the still dominant stereotypes of Latin America as a land of caudillos and authoritarianism. Notions of

what is “true” democracy are still largely derived from the European and North American experiences. However now, as those state-centered models of democracy and nation seem to descend into an ever-deepening crisis, it is more important than ever to revisit Latin America’s revolutionary experience in the 19th century. Almost two centuries after Ramón Mercado issued his cry for a social revolution to pave the way for a democracy that would truly be of the people, his voice is still echoing. The peoples and nations of the world will respond in chorus, or not at all.

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