

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Official History and the Myth of Secular Redemption

In the northwestern corner of prerevolutionary Michoacán, social abandon at times took on an almost biblical cast as women trailed after reapers, gleaning spilled and forgotten stalks of wheat.¹ At times, too, peasants foraged in nearby woods for roots and berries to feed their children.² Yet when Mexican President Lázaro Cárdenas promised to deliver peasants from this heritage of social neglect, the poor hardly embraced him. Rather, while Michoacán men accepted lands offered by Cárdenas's cadre of revolutionaries, Michoacán women often clung to their rosaries, as if to amulets dispelling evil. Together these rural men and women (campesinos) came to forge alliances with Cárdenas that transformed Mexico's postrevolutionary state.

This story has not been told. Instead, Mexican governmental ideologues have offered up a myth of secular redemption.³ In this myth, Cárdenas is styled as something of a latter-day Jesus. As a redeemer, he traveled from village to village performing wonders. Like no Mexican

1. Interviews with Mari Elena Verduzco de Peña, lifelong resident of Ario de Rayón (formerly Ario Santa Monica), Michoacán, April 1990.

2. José Ventura González, Profesor inspector federal, Michoacán, caja 412, Archivo Histórico de la Secretaría de Educación Pública.

3. Cardenistas drew on a variety of techniques to convey this mythology. They constructed an official revolutionary iconography, an official literature, and an official art. Official themes filled pages of textbooks, such as Ignacio Ramírez, *El niño campesino: Libro tercero, escuelas rurales* (Mexico City: Editorial Patria, 1939), and G. Lucio,

head of state since the hapless emperor Maximilian, he listened as campesinos detailed their troubles. Most spectacularly, while Cárdenas multiplied no loaves or fishes, he divided large estates into peasant plots. In response, campesinos crowded around to pay homage to him and his government.

A luminous image and a generous one, it has proved compelling to scholars. This is probably because Cárdenas's land redistribution—on paper, at least—appears to coincide with the radical hope at the heart of Emiliano Zapata's agrarian revolution.⁴ And however important it has been to decry the easy romanticism of this portrait,⁵ to ponder the psychological confusion that has led non-Mexicans and nonpeasants to take comfort in community struggles far from their doors,⁶ the importance of such peasant struggles persists. Expressed simply, efforts to forge relatively egalitarian communities speak to deeply felt human needs for connection to neighbors, for a just return on labor.⁷ To the

Simiente: Libro segundo para escuelas rurales (Mexico City: Editorial Patria, n.d.), and novels, including Gregorio López y Fuentes, *El indio*, José Rubén Romero, *Mi caballo, mi perro y mi rifle* (Barcelona, 1936). Statues of official heroes graced village squares. A revolutionary calendar commemorated official dates. For an extended analysis of this mythology, see Marjorie Becker, "Lázaro Cárdenas and the Mexican Counter-Revolution: The Struggle over Culture in Michoacán, 1934–1940" (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1988), ch. 1.

Just as the French revolutionaries established a revolutionary tradition that has endured to this day, so too the French were pioneers in the effort to create revolutionary culture. See Lynn Hunt, *Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984). For a provocative critique of the time-bound provincialism that leads historians of the French revolution (like their Mexican cousins) to reproduce the assumptions of the revolutionaries themselves, see François Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution*, trans. Elborg Forster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

4. As I attempt to demonstrate both in "Lázaro Cárdenas" and below, the implementation was a different matter.

5. Frans J. Schryer, *The Rancheros of Pisasflores: The History of a Peasant Bourgeoisie in Twentieth Century Mexico* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980); Alan Knight, *The Mexican Revolution*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986). For a particularly scathing attack on peasant hopes and ideals, an attack nurtured in the old battles pitting Stalinism against assorted leftist alternatives, see E. J. Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Protest in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1959).

6. For a sophisticated version of this approach, see Roger Bartra, *La jaula de la melancolía: Identidad y metamorfosis del mexicano* (Mexico City: Editorial Grijalbo, 1987). See also Guillermo Bonfil Batalla, *México profundo: una civilización negada* (Mexico City: Editorial Grijalbo, 1987).

7. These needs have been expressed politically in movements as geographically disparate as the U.S. Populist movement, the largest third-party movement ever to sweep

extent that scholarly work has recognized the diverse political expression of those needs, it has revealed a deeply humanistic face.⁸

At the same time, this image of Cárdenas delivering a human flock from hunger has led scholars to reproduce the official story.⁹ While a debate surrounds Cárdenas's involvement with the peasantry, the controversy tends to focus on Cárdenas's motivation in redistributing the land. Was Cárdenas a rural democrat, as Frank Tannenbaum and Silvia and Nathaniel Weyl insisted so long ago?¹⁰ Or was the Cárdenas period Nora Hamilton's "experiment with quasi socialist forms of ownership and control of the means of production" or Adolfo Gilly's second phase of a socialist revolution?¹¹ Or yet again, was Cárdenas the

the United States, Spanish anarchism, and the second phase of the U.S. feminist movement. On the Populists, see Lawrence C. Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise: The Populist Moment in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976). On Spanish anarchism, see Clara Lida, *Anarquismo y revolución en la España del XIX* (Madrid: Siglo XXI de España, 1972), and Temma Kaplan, *The Anarchists of Andalusia, 1868–1903* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977). On U.S. feminism, see Sara Evans, *Personal Politics: The Roots of Women's Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left* (New York: Knopf, 1979).

8. See, for example, G. M. Joseph, *Revolution from Without: Yucatán, Mexico, and the United States, 1880–1924* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982); Frank Tannenbaum, *Mexico: The Struggle for Peace and Bread* (New York: Knopf, 1950); John Womack Jr., *Zapata and the Mexican Revolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 1968); Friedrich Katz, *The Secret War in Mexico: Europe, the United States, and the Mexican Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981); even, notwithstanding the normative nonsense regarding "normative nonsense," Knight, *The Mexican Revolution*, 2:518.

9. Traditional practitioners of official history include Leslie Byrd Simpson (*Many Mexicos*, 4th ed. [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966]); Charles Cumberland (*Mexico: The Struggle for Modernity* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1968]); Howard Cline (*Mexico: Revolution to Evolution* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1962]); and Daniel Cosío Villegas ("Mexico's Crisis," in *Is the Mexican Revolution Dead?* ed. Stanley Ross, 2d ed. [Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1975]).

The most recent rendition of this approach is Alan Knight's *The Mexican Revolution*, a sophisticated work whose great merit is to remind us of the popular nature of the revolution. And yet for all his sophistication, Knight shares with traditional historians a limited appreciation of the political cultures that led both to rebellion and to consolidation of postrevolutionary governments. As a result, Knight at times suggests, first, that peasants' economic suffering in and of itself was sufficient to produce rebellion and, second, that Constitutionalist leaders and peasant fighters automatically shared identical interests.

10. See Frank Tannenbaum, *Peace by Revolution: Mexico after 1910* (1933; reprint, New York: Columbia University Press, 1966); idem, *Mexico*; and Silvia Weyl and Nathaniel Weyl, *The Reconquest of Mexico: The Years of Lázaro Cárdenas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1939).

11. Nora Hamilton, *The Limits of State Autonomy: Post-Revolutionary Mexico* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 140; Adolfo Gilly, *La revolución interrumpida* (Mexico City: El Caballito, 1971).

populist demagogue described by Arturo Anguiano and Arnaldo Córdova?¹²

Preoccupied by this image of Cárdenas as either redeemer or tarnished messiah, scholars have shared an insufficiently political image of the peasantry. Out of a diverse and contentious population repeatedly rising to rectify a varied array of grievances,¹³ a stripped-down image of the land-hungry peasant emerges. In response to their need for sustenance peasants enact a single political sensibility. Rising out of hunger, they flock to the leaders who feed them.¹⁴ The suggestion is that once their nutritional requirements have been met, peasants no longer participate in the construction of the state. State making, in turn, is portrayed as fairly aloof from peasant concerns.¹⁵ In short, there is a strange, exponential Pavlovianism here, the state responding to peasants responding to their bellies.

Clerical imagery seems appropriate for a place as deeply and variously Catholic as northwestern Michoacán. Yet in examining the Cardenista effort to remake Michoacán peasants, we find that Cardenismo

12. Arturo Anguiano, *El estado y la política obrera del cardenismo* (Mexico City: Editorial Era, 1975); Arnaldo Córdova, *La política de masas del cardenismo* (Mexico City: Serie Popular Era, 1974).

13. For the late colonial period, see William B. Taylor, *Drinking, Homicide, and Rebellion in Colonial Mexican Villages* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1979). For the nineteenth century, see Jean Meyer, *Problemas campesinos y revueltas agrarias, 1821–1910* (Mexico City: SEP, 1973); and Leticia Reina, *Las rebeliones campesinas en México* (Mexico City: Siglo XXI Editores, 1980). And in Jarácuaro Michoacán some peasants sought to remedy spiritual, political, and economic grievances in a series of encounters with Lázaro Cárdenas. For an analysis highlighting peasant ideological flexibility in this instance, see Marjorie Becker, “Black and White and Color: *Cardenismo* and the Search for a *Campesino* Ideology,” *Comparative Studies in Ideology and History* 29 (1987): 453–65.

14. The emphasis on campesino “creaturely” characteristics is strongly reminiscent of Domingo Sarmiento in *Civilización y barbarie* (Buenos Aires: Librería El Ateneo, 1952).

15. This has been particularly true of David A. Brading and some of the scholars who joined with him to produce *Caudillo and Peasant in the Mexican Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980). For them, the only relevant historical actors are the leaders of the victorious Constitutionalist coalition. Indeed, if the official storytelling technique is to minimize campesino interests, the caudillo scholars’ strategy is to ignore them entirely. While the careers of caudillos are amply documented, campesinos’ demands, their ideology, the nature of their leverage with caudillos, even the campesinos themselves, disappear entirely. Of particular interest in this regard, all in Brading’s volume, are Brading’s introduction, “National Politics and the Populist Tradition,” and his preface; Ian Jacobs, “Rancheros of Guerrero: The Figueroa Brothers in the Revolution,” 76–91; Linda B. Hall, “Alvaro Obregón and the Agrarian Movement, 1912–1920,” 124–39; and Dudley Ankersen, “Saturnino Cedillo: A Traditional Caudillo in San Luis Potosí,” 140–68.

should not be compared to lightning-bolt messianic activity. Rather, a comparison to the work of the sixteenth-century Spanish missionaries seems more apt.¹⁶ For, like the sixteenth-century friars, the Cardenistas in Michoacán determined to undermine the previous ideological order and to create institutions reflecting their state-making project. And again like the early friars, Cardenistas sought popular identification with their program.¹⁷ Expressed in more contemporary terms, the Cardenista effort to bring revolution to Michoacán might be called a hegemonic project.¹⁸

Yet how were Cardenistas to construct hegemony? Just as it has been a troublesome, if dimly perceived, historical question, so too it was a troublesome historical inheritance for Cárdenas. The issue first emerged for the leaders of the victorious Constitutionalist armies of the 1910–20 Mexican revolution. Led by members of the middle and the upper class, the Constitutionlists defeated the popular armies of Emiliano Zapata and Pancho Villa. Nonetheless, the specter of the popular armies was to haunt the Constitutionalist victors for two decades. What would it take to gain peasant allegiance to the postrevolutionary government?

16. Some of the Cardenistas themselves compared their work to that of the early missionaries. For an analysis of this tendency see Becker, “Black and White and Color,” and chapter 4 below.

17. To be sure, the literature of the so-called spiritual conquest of the Aztecs yields far more concern with the friars’ dogged determination to create identification with their soul-saving project than with the more power-laden effort to develop alliances. This is because the project has widely been conceptualized as an encounter between two homogeneous peoples embodying the spirit of their respective cultures. Based on scholarly determinations that a single moment in time represented Aztec and Spanish cultures—as though any photograph ever encapsulates human life—the resulting studies reveal limited appreciation for the cultural exchanges that occurred and specifically for the ways the Indians *always* affected, and at times transformed, the terms of domination. For the classic example of this tendency, informed by considerable identification with the Christianization project, see Robert Ricard, *The Spiritual Conquest of Mexico: An Essay on the Apostolate and the Evangelizing Methods of the Mendicant Orders in New Spain, 1523–1572*, trans. Leslie Byrd Simpson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966). Reversing Ricard’s bias, Tzvetan Todorov develops a morally sophisticated meditation on the encounter between Spaniards and Indians in *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Harper Colophon, 1985). Nonetheless, for Todorov, Spanish brutality emerges as an inevitable realization of what he posits as a Spanish mental superiority over the Aztecs. For a fascinating example of the Yucatán Mayas’ ingenious yet tragic responses to spiritual conquest, see Inga Clendinnen’s elegant *Ambivalent Conquests: Maya and Spaniard in Yucatán, 1517–1570* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

18. I have always viewed theory as intellectuals’ efforts to grapple with complex realities. This means that the notion of seizing a theory and applying it to the object of

Dogged by old images of a barbarous peasantry, stunned by the persistence and the longevity of the peasants' clamor, throughout the twenties Constitutionalist leaders recognized only that peasants called for sustenance. This was particularly true of Alvaro Obregón and Plutarco Elías Calles, Constitutionalist leaders who dominated the Mexican presidency from 1920 through 1934.¹⁹ Then came the 1926–29 Cristero rebellion. Responding to governmental anticlerical legislation and priestly exhortation, peasants throughout western Mexico rose to the cry *¡Viva Cristo Rey!* (Long Live Christ the King!). Notwithstanding the conflicts that historically threatened peasant solidarity, ragtag bands of diverse campesinos had managed to unite. As though the figure of Cristo Rey on their banners lent courage and solace, they fought to heal an array of spiritual, economic, and political wounds. Turning the anger often directed toward neighbors against peasants fighting for the government, Cristeros mounted a three-year guerrilla war. Before it was over, perhaps as many as eighty thousand peasants died.²⁰

study has been an alien approach. There is a dialectical relationship between historical subjects and their activities and the ways of ordering them. In regard to hegemony, some of those ways have been stimulated by the work of the Frankfurt school, Gramsci, Genovese, Marcuse, Laclau, and Mouffe. See, for example, Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971); Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (New York: Verso, 1989); Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage Books, 1976); and Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (Boston: Beacon, 1966). For an often poetic rendition of the effects of hegemony, see Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968).

I would particularly like to single out Laclau and Mouffe's work for its appreciation of subordinate classes' capacities to forge alliances that can at times affect the terms of domination. Moreover, their work serves as a corrective to many scholars' reflexive tendency to grant priority to economic causality. In addition, in "The Conflictual Construction of Community: Gender, Ethnicity, Hegemony," ch. 3 of *Peasant and Nation: The Making of Post-Colonial Mexico and Peru* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 63–88, Florencia E. Mallon uses the concept of hegemony in a provocative and inspiring way.

19. For a fine analysis of the political culture from which the victorious Sonoran revolutionary leaders emerged, see Héctor Aguilar Camín, "The Relevant Tradition: Sonoran Leaders in the Revolution," in Brading, *Caudillo*, 92–123. On Obregón's efforts to activate that culture in response to peasants' battles over land, see Linda Hall, "Alvaro Obregón and the Politics of Mexican Land Reform," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 60:2 (1980): 213–38.

20. In *La Cristiada*, trans. Aurelio Garzón del Camino, 2d ed., 3 vols. (Mexico City: Siglo XXI Editores, 1974), a work of great sensitivity and courage, Jean Meyer

What the Cristeros forcefully demonstrated was that the problem had been misconstrued. Constitutionalist faced no economic problem in the narrow sense.²¹ Although the problem has not been conceptualized in these terms, Cristeros, like the revolutionary campesinos before them, presented Constitutionalist with an intellectual problem. Postrevolutionary governmental hegemony would rest on knowledge of campesino cultures.

Campesino cultures? What can this mean? A term misunderstood by the Cardenistas themselves,²² *culture* refers to a people's evolving interpretation of the world and the way that interpretation shapes the contours of everyday life. To be sure, "a people's interpretation" connotes images of a homogeneous peasantry, placid as silk, and *culture* has long suggested shared values.²³ Indeed, it is difficult to resist Clifford Geertz's insistence that culture is the public practice of those values. A sober, limited definition, it refuses the temptation to read the heart of the other.²⁴

However, for historians pondering Geertz, a central problem per-

provides much of the evidence for this interpretation. In addition, *La Cristiada* reveals Meyer's passionate identification with his historical subjects. It is this kind of love for ordinary people, rather than a shared ideology or culture, as Meyer insists (2:96), that links Meyer's work with that of Womack. Yet for all its originality, *La Cristiada* is flawed by Meyer's insistence that campesinos shared an identical understanding of Catholicism, itself a perfect reflection of reality (3:307, 310). Meyer's response to the strongest evidence to the contrary—the fact that campesinos fought for the government against the Cristeros—is a masterpiece of Manichean thought. Progovernmental campesinos, Meyer maintains, were manipulated (3:82), whereas Cristeros embodied authentic Catholic purity, even—perhaps most fully—when they cut off their foes' genitals.

21. There is a deep irony to the way Latin Americanists have misconstrued this problem. Men and women whose stock in trade is the mental universe have persistently shrunk peasants' mental universes to issues of subsistence. See for example, John Tutino, *From Insurrection to Revolution in Mexico: Social Bases of Agrarian Violence, 1750–1910* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986). Among non-Latin Americanists, even a scholar as creative as Pierre Bourdieu conceptualizes culture as a transposition—in the musical sense—of material needs. See Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984) and idem, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977).

22. See chapter 4 below.

23. For a deeply pessimistic view of the possibilities of subordinate classes' creativity in the light of just such shared values, see Sidney W. Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1985).

24. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 10. It should be remembered that this is a retreat, not something to be glorified. Praxis may be all that we can know or guess about, but it should not be mistaken for all that there is.

sists: how do people come to share values? While Geertz acknowledges the existence of diverse and conflicting cultural behavior—there are those sheep stealers, after all—the conflicts tend to be waged between cultural adepts and outsiders.²⁵ Yet for scholars of Mexican peasant communities, this dichotomy will not do. The premise of colonialism is extraction, and the common scenario has been one of outsiders bullying insiders into submission. Nonetheless, campesinos confined within village boundaries have not proved immune to the temptations of theft and exploitation of their neighbors. In short, Mexican peasant cultures can in no way be viewed as static oases of calm.

Moreover, Spanish colonialism also created—and partially reproduced—a welter of sociological distinctions. It is common to refer to such variations among population groups as mosaic tiles, but in thinking of Michoacán's rural population, the image of puzzle pieces seems more useful. For in Michoacán the divisions were so extensive that elites, whether priests or Cardenistas, would again and again ponder how campesinos could fit together. Geography flung them into dozens of small villages. Ethnic variation was a factor, for while most campesinos were mestizos, one-fifth of the 1920 population was classified as Tarascan Indians.²⁶ Almost all were poor, but the population was marked by hundreds of minute economic distinctions. Similarly, while most men worked on large estates, their jobs ranged from water carrier to cowboy. Not least, men and women were assigned different lots in life. While such variations would seem to guarantee conflict, it is still pertinent to consider the specific sources of dispute among neighbors. What precisely fueled their persistent strife? And how could they come to share cultural perspectives?

Inheriting the task of pacifying the smoldering west, Cárdenas urgently needed to understand the peasant cultures that fueled both conflict and consensus. It was just as important that he recognize that any effort at rural pacification would itself be culturally driven. Yet these notions eluded him. And as the problem of ignorance, even partial ignorance, is that it refuses to recognize itself, Cárdenas plunged ahead. Oblivious to the cultural nature of his response, he called for what amounted to the cultural transformation of the countryside. He

25. *Ibid.*, 8–9, 18.

26. These population figures are based on the 1921 Mexican census and are drawn from Fernando Foglio Miramontes, *Geografía económica agrícola del estado de Michoacán*, 4 vols. (Mexico City: Editorial cultura, 1936) 2:138.

mobilized a cadre—teachers, agricultural agents, rural political bosses (caciques). They were to overhaul land tenure arrangements, to dispel illiteracy, to remake campesino habits. In addition, they were to revise peasant assessments of the world—that amorphous realm of allegiance, hope, desire. Most importantly, Cárdenas called on his cadre to develop peasant acceptance of this human reconstruction.

The result was that the countryside was turned into a schoolroom. Far from another dowdy foray into the history of teachers instructing children in their first letters, Cardenistas constructed lessons out of their own cultural perspectives. More precisely, Michoacán Cardenistas were a diverse group of men and women, mestizos and Indians touched by the historically rooted cultural clash between liberalism and Catholicism in Michoacán. Because of their diversity, Cardenistas would develop sundry approaches to forging revolution. However, as renegades from Catholicism, Michoacán Cardenista leaders set an anti-clerical tone that dominated the approach to cultural transformation.

This meant that many Cardenistas stumbled—without fully appreciating their clumsiness—onto a peasantry trained in a very specific form of Catholicism. It was a symbolic system largely based on gender that called for a self-denial that the priests referred to as purity. That is, Catholic elites had developed a symbolic system that depended on an understanding and acceptance both of women's actual abnegation and of that abnegation as a metaphor designed to restrain the potential nonconformity of Indians, peasants, workers, all subordinate groups. In return, priests held out an infinite array of consolations. However painful the wound, the church promised the balm of redemption.

Baffled by Catholic enthusiasms, Cardenistas developed an awkward form of government, here liberating, there grievously exploitative. This posed a grave challenge to the campesinos. Hardly immune to the exploitation, campesinos were also alert to the benefits of allying with Cárdenas. The price would be revealing knowledge of their cultures, knowledge that to an extent had served as a final refuge against abuse and misunderstanding. In a series of sober, premeditated moves, campesinos relinquished part of their knowledge. Schooling the revolutionaries in their cultures, they attained greater participation in the national political arena. At the same time, they enabled Lázaro Cárdenas to bind them—and peasants all over Mexico—more securely to the postrevolutionary government.