

Introduction

IN THE FIRST DAYS OF 1865, a police officer ripped an anonymous broadside from a Mexico City wall and sent it to his superiors. The short text plunged readers into the middle of a complex political debate. Its author, expressing dismay, advised the national government not to scuttle diplomatic talks with the Vatican (see figure 1).¹ Government sources had recently hinted that negotiations to restore good relations between Mexico and Rome might be breaking down, generating a flurry of concern about the actions of Mexico's new ruler, the Hapsburg prince-turned-emperor Maximilian.² Just months after being placed on a Mexican throne by the troops of Napoleon III of France, Maximilian's headstrong dealings with the Vatican and plan to create a national church had begun to erode the confidence of the conservatives and clergy who had helped bring him to power.³ President Benito Juárez, who led the republican resistance from his base in Northern Mexico, had rejected the emperor's authority, and large swaths of Mexican territory remained unsubdued. Now this anonymous broadside added pressure from yet another angle, a position captured in its author's choice of pseudonym, "A Christian Liberal." Claiming to represent "general opinion," the author argued that ordinary Mexicans favored good relations with Rome and wanted to resolve, rather than exacerbate, the conflicts that had wracked the nation in recent years over the power and status of the Catholic Church.

Recognizing the text as a public rebuke of the emperor, city officials moved quickly to investigate the broadside's source and contain its spread. Similar copies had already been identified on street corners around the capital, yet the single sheet of paper did not provide much information to help the authorities. The author's decision to use a *nom de plume* established the broadside's political commitments but also masked the author's identity.

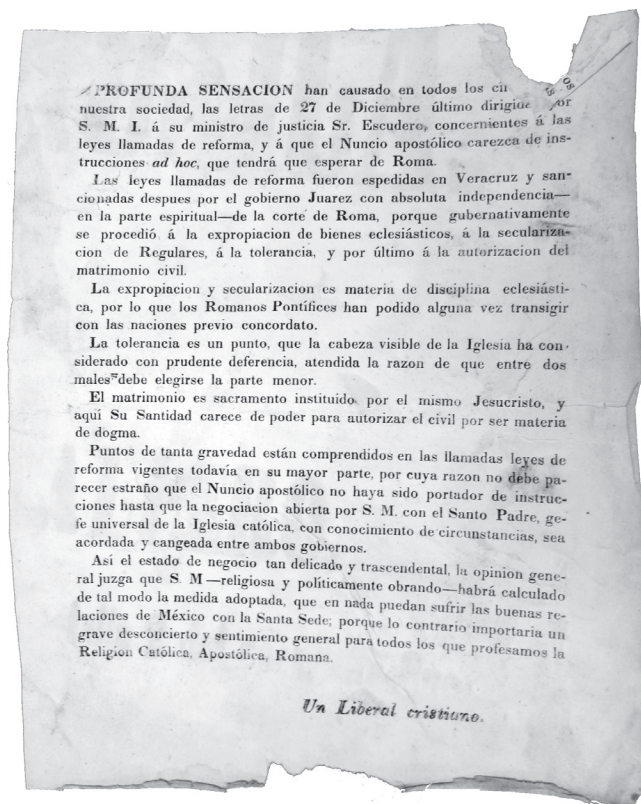


FIGURE 1. Recto of broadside *Profunda sensación* (Mexico City, 1865).
 Archivo General de la Nación, Mexico City.

The broadside's printer should have included a name and address on the document, as required by law. This mechanism provided officials with an important tool of accountability. Here, however, the broadside's creators had purposefully omitted any publication information, making verification impossible. These strategies ensured that the investigation would come up short, but official anxieties about public criticism in print allowed the ephemeral document to endure in the archive. Within a day, the broadside had traveled from a Mexico City street corner through the chain of command and onto the desk of one of the nation's top officials, the minister of the interior. Filed away after the case went cold, it joined a vast corpus of controversial ephemera preserved among the papers of official power.

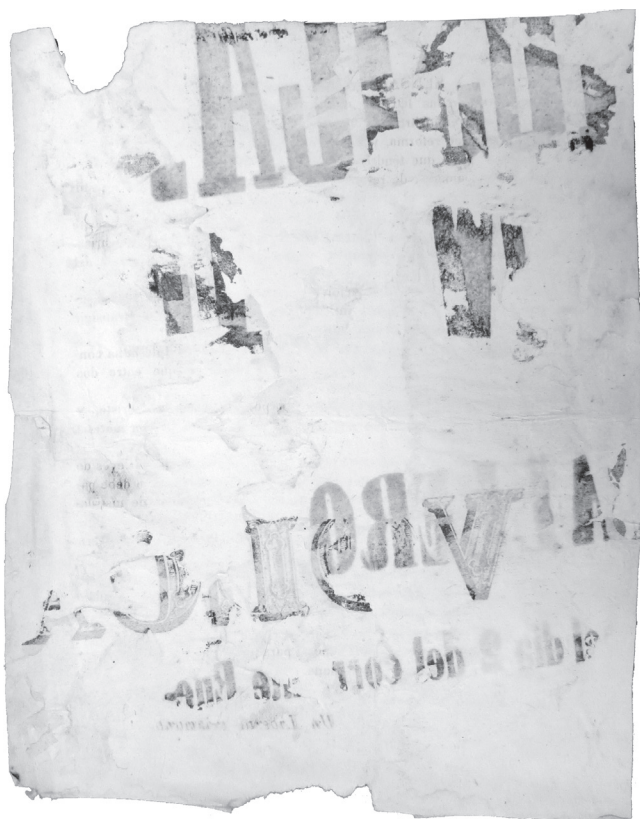


FIGURE 2. Verso of broadside *Profunda sensación*, with layers of previously posted broadsides attached. Archivo General de la Nación, Mexico City.

On the verso of the broadside, another story emerges. There, the physical traces of at least three other broadsides can be seen embedded in fragmented layers of ink, paper, and paste (see figure 2). Bold letters and novelty typefaces selected to draw the eye hint at an urban landscape where printed texts acted as routine provocateurs that worked through the city's built environment.⁴ As a Mexico City governor once complained, broadsides posted on street corners and church doors provoked "disorders from the disputes of those that read them, some defending the pros, and others the cons of their content."⁵ The governor had observed how printed documents could galvanize political discussions, blurring the boundaries between oral and literate modes of communication in a society with low literacy levels. These discussions could

become heated and cacophonous, too, a feature embodied in the layered verso of the broadside. The slather of starch, paper, and fragmentary words offers a visual and material complement to the oral cacophony described by the governor. It captures something of the spirit with which print's nineteenth-century creators and users ignored the ideals of rational, measured debate that Mexico's lawmakers invoked when they described how freedom of the press was supposed to function. Instead, the actors who engaged print aimed to utterly obliterate their opponents. With a tug and peel, local officials entered the political game as well, ordering subordinates across the city to "rip off the pasquinades and apprehend whoever posted them."⁶ Zealous enforcers occasionally added chunks of wall plaster to the archival record.

As anxious officials attempted to track down the culprits behind broadsides like this, they illuminated a contentious field of political exchange that flourished around texts printed in the urban core of Mexico City: the field of printing politics. After Mexico's independence in 1821, individuals and factions of all stripes embraced the printing press as a weapon in their broader struggles over power. In spite of the fact that most Mexicans could not read, political actors poured energy and resources into printing in order to advance proposals for the new nation, challenge rivals, and immortalize themselves in the public record. Printing was by no means a new technology, especially in Mexico City, which hosted the oldest Western printing tradition in the Americas. Since the founding of the first press there around 1539, the city's printers had collaborated with the powerful royal and religious officials who clustered in the urban core, contributing to the expansion and consolidation of colonial rule, Catholicism, and a local creole intellectual community.⁷ Mexico City remained the preeminent national center of publishing after independence. The collapse of the Spanish regime, however, transformed the relationship among printers, authors, the state, and the church, ushering in an era characterized by uncertainty and heated debate. As printing intertwined with emerging networks of urban politics that crisscrossed the nation's capital, a familiar media form, rooted in Hispanic political culture, gained new urgency and possibility.⁸

In the eyes of its elite nineteenth-century users, print had a powerful role to play in shaping the present and future of the nation. After independence, Mexican intellectuals and statesmen, in step with peers across the Americas, identified printing as an essential tool to educate a population largely deprived of formal schooling. Projecting enlightened attitudes that predated independence, reformist commentators hopefully described print's ability to

represent and shape public opinion, forming a check against government tyranny or abuses of power. Creating viable domestic publishing industries, nation builders agreed, could help new polities develop collective identities and secure intellectual and cultural autonomy from Europe.⁹ Not all observers shared the same optimistic sensibilities toward print as a didactic aid or check on state power. While some extolled the press's transcendent ability "to spread the seed of virtue to all corners, establish the principles of justice and make nations happy with the immense benefits of civilization," others emphasized its potential to incite violence, undermine Catholic piety, or erode the established order when used incorrectly.¹⁰ The appearance of competing attitudes toward the medium reflected the competing political and ideological projects that emerged in the ferment of the early national era. Yet the fact that virtually all political actors embraced printing in spite of their concerns reveals a shared construction of the technology as both a symbol and an engine of social and civilizational achievement that could be used to effect calculated change.¹¹ Print's modernizing potential seemed matched only by its power to conserve ideas for future generations, forming the raw materials from which histories would be written. One Latin American statesman conveyed this sense of gravity when he described the press's lofty power to make words "pass triumphantly across the ocean and the centuries."¹²

The realities of printing brought such high-minded discursive formulations down to earth. After all, those who hoped to harness print's power needed access to an actual printing press and the embodied knowledge of skilled artisans in order to publish. And this meant confronting the gritty pragmatics associated with running a printing business in nineteenth-century Mexico: the politics of printing itself. The artisans and workers who kept the presses running had to be paid, yet the owners of Mexico City's printing shops faced numerous challenges. In the neighboring United States, economic growth, urbanization, and rising literacy rates propelled the expansion and industrialization of the printing trades and the emergence of publishing, type founding, and press manufacturing industries with national and international reach throughout the nineteenth century.¹³ In independent Mexico, however, the collapse of the colonial economy, compounded by debt, foreign invasions, and political instability, meant that local printers worked in more constrained circumstances and could not count on a steadily growing consumer market for print. By the end of the nineteenth century, imperfect government statistics pegged national literacy rates at just 17 percent.¹⁴ While literacy was more widespread in Mexico City, the nation's center of power and

wealth, readers were not necessarily paying customers. Adding to these challenges, printers had to assume considerable risk to import expensive machinery and supplies like metal type and paper from abroad.

As they confronted economic realities, printers embraced politics as central to their heterogeneous business strategies. Doubling as publishers, they developed and managed partisan newspapers and cultivated connections to politicians and religious patrons that might yield lucrative contracts. Printers forged individual and collective personae as they tangled with rivals in the public arena, framing and shaping the contours of political debates in the process. Close observers, like noted historian and bibliographer Joaquín García Icazbalceta (1824–1894), lamented that the politicization of Mexico's printing trades detracted from nobler publishing endeavors.¹⁵ Yet printing politics offered printers income, visibility, and a degree of power. It also brought them under the scrutiny of wary or openly hostile officials, whose unpredictable behavior could spell ruin for the entire printing shop community.

State and religious authorities based in the capital looked upon printing shops as suspicious places, at once familiar and frustratingly beyond official control. Even as they approached printing as an essential political tool, they struggled to channel and neutralize the challenges that materialized on the shop floor. Uruguayan literary scholar Ángel Rama famously argued that urban elites used technologies like writing and printing to rule over majority illiterate societies in colonial Latin America, wielding literate power from within the "lettered city."¹⁶ This configuration, he and others contend, morphed but endured throughout the nineteenth century as nation builders worked to construct a political system ruled by respectable, propertied, literate men, or *hombres de bien*.¹⁷ The printing shops that operated at the heart of the lettered city, however, fostered a more democratic worldview at the intersection of intellectual and manual labor. On the shop floor, a cross section of urban society collaborated to transform written texts into printed ones. There, formally educated editors and upwardly mobile journalists rubbed elbows with self-educated type compositors, skilled press operators, and illiterate shop servants. Successful printing shop owners, many of whom began as apprentices, leveraged their skills and connections to become well-known public figures. Some even gained seats in local and national government, acquiring clients of their own as they rose in stature.¹⁸ Over the course of the nineteenth century, printing shop communities embraced a liberal discourse that celebrated these exceptional printers as "men of talent," home-grown examples of merit-based social mobility that challenged the stigma

associated with manual labor and reflected positively on urban working communities.

As they gained influence and visibility, printers faced criticism and outright scorn from social superiors, especially when they tangled over politics. When Mexico's most powerful conservative statesman, Lucas Alamán, brought charges against radical printer Vicente García Torres (1811–1894) for defamation in 1849, for example, he denounced the printer's "failure to act as a gentleman and lack of education" to the judge overseeing the case.¹⁹ Confronted later with the printer's defense, Alamán pulled rank, accusing his adversary of making arguments that "while tolerable in the exercises of beginner schoolboys, are in very bad taste and unworthy of the consideration of the Courts." Such comments reveal the thinly veiled class prejudices harbored by political elites, who sought to put upstart printers in their place. These prejudices endured in spite of the intellectual project, with roots in the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, to reconfigure work in a positive light.²⁰ Like artisans across Latin America who deployed the egalitarian language of liberalism and republicanism to challenge the stigma against manual labor in the nineteenth century, printers emphasized their honor, respectability, and patriotism to defend their presence in the public sphere.²¹ However, they often found themselves caught between dueling negative depictions unique to their craft and its relationship to words, being viewed either as partisan lackeys or unprincipled mercenaries willing to print anything for a profit.

Negative characterizations of printers also reflected the frustrations of officials who struggled to regulate the complex world of print production and confront its social implications, which they found especially troubling given Mexico's climate of political instability. The politics of the early republican era involved spirited contests over the form and direction of the new national government, in which urban popular sectors played a visible role. In the first decades after independence, presidential administrations frequently collapsed midterm, and lawmakers rewrote the constitution multiple times as conflicts between federalists and centralists, exacerbated by foreign interventions and government penury, provoked regional revolts and military intervention. By the 1850s these fluid struggles would mutate and expand to full-scale civil war, with Mexicans divided over the role of the Catholic Church in national affairs. In the midst of this instability, postindependence governments across the political spectrum—from radical to conservative, republican to monarchist—all proclaimed their support for "freedom of the press," professing a shared commitment to liberal principles. Yet their language, actions, and related laws

established clear limitations and boundaries around printed expression. National officials, hoping to channel print at its source, enacted a dizzying succession of press laws, executive decrees, and juridical interpretations bearing on printing. The Catholic Church, a major actor in the political struggles surrounding nineteenth-century nation building, also attempted to shape publishing in the public arena and behind the scenes.

The laws, cases, and policies that affected printing, accumulating steadily throughout the nineteenth century, reflected officials' enduring concern about the power of print. Famed pamphleteer José Joaquín Fernández de Lizardi (1776–1827) captured the resulting climate of uncertainty felt among print communities when he sardonically recast freedom of the press as “danger of the press” in one of his fictional dialogues.²² While Lizardi wrote this analysis in 1820, when press freedom was still relatively new in Mexico, its basic premise continued to resonate throughout the nineteenth century, as a revolving cast of officials struggled to develop a stable regulatory regime. By the late nineteenth century the administration of Porfirio Díaz had consolidated a more powerful state over thirty years in power, strengthening the ability of government to oversee and tame printing politics. Yet the legal framework that regulated printed speech remained in flux until 1917, when the Mexican Revolution forced a reevaluation of the nation's press laws.

Mexican authorities' inability to stabilize the laws governing printed speech over nearly a century reveals printing as a key yet underexplored node of conflict in Mexico's process of state formation. For those in power, print posed a dilemma. Even as they hoped to channel printed expression in order to contain political challenges, officials also depended on the printing press to wage their own political struggles against rivals, run the government, and create an archive of state achievements. After attempts to create a printing office inside the National Palace failed in 1828, the national government turned to Mexico City printers to produce the official materials of statecraft, from letterhead to the state's mouthpiece, the government gazette. The Ministry of the Interior, which monitored Mexico City's world of printing and pursued press infractions, also oversaw the government's own printing operations, negotiating the minutiae of its many contracts with local printers and fretting over its inability to fully control the state's own printed image. Officials thus acted as both regulators of print and participants in the contentious politics associated with printing. This juggling generated a central, enduring tension that helps to explain government actions toward printing and the press. Joining political rivals, church officials, upwardly mobile

journalists, printing shop owners, and a diverse cast of artisans and workers, officials in the emerging national state competed over the ability to access and command print production.

RETHINKING PRESS FREEDOM AND POLITICAL CULTURE THROUGH PRINTING

By examining struggles over printing, *Ink under the Fingernails* explores Mexico's nineteenth-century history through a new lens. It reconstructs the practical negotiations, legal debates, and discursive maneuvers that unfolded in the back rooms, printing shops, government offices, courts, and streets of the capital around print production and regulation, from the late colonial era to the Mexican Revolution of 1910. The book's attention to practices not only reveals the wide range of actors, from powerful presidents to humble type compositors, whose lives were bound up in these struggles; it also sheds new light on the political, ideological, and social conflicts that accompanied postindependence state formation. As students of the nineteenth century know well, the advance of liberalism and the ways it was embraced in theory and negotiated in practice have constituted a central focus of recent histories about Mexico and Latin America.²³ Revising older narratives about liberalism's supposed incompatibility with Mexican realities, regional studies have emphasized how urban sectors and rural peasant and indigenous communities built local liberal (and, in some contexts, conservative) political cultures as they confronted a variety of state-building projects.²⁴ The printing shop is a particularly dynamic site from which to reexamine these contingent processes in Mexico's urban core. It is a space where familiar categories often used to explain Mexico's political trajectory break down. Printing shops were microcosms of urban society, complicating distinctions between elite and popular sectors. Members of every faction and institution commissioned the medium, revealing printing as a "political arena" and a shared "instrument of practical politics."²⁵ Yet even as this broad engagement reflected the emergence of a public sphere facilitated by press freedom, the terms of debate were far from settled. Indeed, printing became a practice around which the outlines of broader ideological, institutional, and sociocultural conflicts took shape, not just as a clash of textual positions but in contests over the material reproduction of texts.

Indeed, we cannot understand struggles over a "free press" in nineteenth-century Mexico without taking seriously their material and laboring

dimensions. Current scholarship on Mexico has begun to move beyond the contents of press laws toward examining broader legal institutions like the press jury in order to analyze interactions between state and civil society.²⁶ Yet by focusing on journalists and the abstract category of the press, these studies have not only overlooked the full range of printed forms that engaged politics, such as ephemeral *papeles públicos*, serialized fiction, government decrees, printers' specimens, and bureaucratic documents; they have also underestimated the degree to which nineteenth-century officials cared about regulating the practical processes of printing as a means to regulate printed speech. Lawmakers repeatedly discussed how best to channel print at its source, and officials used legal and extralegal action to target printing shop communities. In public, actions against printing shop communities became a central theme—rather than simply a footnote—in political debates about press freedom and power.

Broader questions about the nature of labor, intellect, and agency in relation to texts shadowed politicized debates about print and its regulation. Printing shops presented lawmakers with a complex challenge. Many minds and hands participated in the production and distribution process from start to finish. Press laws defined specific categories like authors, publishers, printers, and *responsables* (responsible parties) in order to ensure that some individual could be held responsible for any infractions at the end of the day. Arguments in congress, the courts, and the press, however, reveal a lack of consensus not only about the rules of who should be held responsible for printed texts, but also about the very categories used to describe the field of textual production in the first place. On the one hand, the question of whether an author or a printer bore responsibility for a controversial text—whether “moral” or “mechanical” creation mattered more and what counted as each—loomed, unresolved, over printing politics. On the other hand, printers proved notoriously slippery under questioning, defying categorization. A single individual might recast himself in multiple ways or describe printing shop practices differently to fit the circumstances, reflecting the strategic and situational deployment of legal and professional categories.

By bringing printers into the picture, this book offers new insight into historical struggles over the meanings of freedom. Efforts to regulate printed speech did not flow in one direction, after all. Printers attempted to shape legal interpretation and the letter of the law through their political activities and in the argumentative strategies they used to contest official actions. They also had the means to construct multifaceted identities in moments of crisis,