

The Revolution in Mexican Independence: Insurgency and the Renegotiation of Property, Production, and Patriarchy in the Bajío, 1800–1855

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The Hidalgo revolt of 1810 marked the commencement of conflicts that brought independence to Mexico in 1821 and then led to a series of revolutionary changes that endured for decades into the national era. As colonial rule ended the contested processes of nation-building began. Mexicans faced new links to the Atlantic economy: silver mining collapsed and struggled to recuperate; textile production foundered in the face of industrial imports, then began to revive with early industrialization in Mexico. A colonial state that was oriented to mediate conflicts gave way to a national polity in which diverse Mexicans saw the state as an agent of their interests in conflict. Elites and popular groups struggled, and at times fought, to determine who would control the state and participate in national, regional, and local politics. Many villagers saw the postindependence era of conflict as a time to renegotiate production and labor relations. And beginning with insurgency in 1810, rural families forced radical transformations in agrarian production and social relations in the region that had been the engine of commercial development in late colonial Mexico: the Bajío, a fertile basin that lay north and west of Mexico City and the central highlands.

The interpretation just given challenges an entrenched vision of Mexican

This essay was first presented to a seminar organized by Eric Van Young at the University of California, San Diego. Discussion there helped to clarify the importance and the uncertainties of the issues explored here. More recently, several *HAHR* readers asked that I make the larger significance of the Puerto de Nieto case study more explicit; a final reader suggested that my interpretations appear controversial. I thank all for their assistance and encouragement. If placing popular participation at the center of independence and nation-building is debatable, it is a debate worth having.

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history: that for all their popular participation, the conflicts that began in 1810 and led to independence constituted a social revolution that failed, while the conflicts that began in 1910, with greater mobilization of the populace and radicalization of the elites, became a transforming national revolution. In accord with this vision, only in the twentieth century did landed elites face expropriation, while peasant communities found new life with massive redistribution of land through agrarian reform. Only after 1910 did a self-proclaimed revolutionary state take power, with peasant villagers an essential political base. If Mexico's revolutionary tradition began in 1810, it was a tradition that was defeated and denied until the great mobilizations of 1910.¹

This essay argues for a different interpretation. At least in the Bajío, it was the insurgency that began with the Hidalgo revolt that initiated an enduring agrarian and social transformation. During a decade of revolt, insurgents challenged property rights and the organization of production and forced a shift from large-scale commercial production to family-based agriculture, a new agrarian system that they sustained long into the national era. For one major estate, detailed evidence reveals a transformation of rural society that included challenges to patriarchy. Did insurgency change family relations across the Bajío? This question is asked, but only partially answered. Analysis of the conflicts that remade agrarian society in the Bajío add a key element to a rapidly emerging vision of popular participation in the struggle for independence and nation-building across Mexico. The result is a new understanding of Mexico from 1810 to 1855 that emphasizes popular power and contested transformations. In popular mobilization, state transformation, and socioeconomic change, the conflictive nineteenth-century decades of insurgency, independence, and nation-building appear at least as revolutionary as the self-consciously revolutionary era of 1910 to 1940.

1. In my study of the social conditions that led to agrarian insurrections in Mexico, I accepted the prevailing view of the consequences of the major rural uprisings: insurgencies that failed in 1810 and a revolution that brought radical change in 1910. See John Tutino, *From Insurrection to Revolution in Mexico: Social Bases of Agrarian Violence, 1750–1940* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1986). The view that the revolutionary potential in the independence era insurgencies was blocked, leading to elite-ruled national developments, continues to mark syntheses ranging from John Lynch's classic *The Spanish American Revolutions, 1808–1826*, 2d ed. (New York: Norton, 1986) to Lester D. Langley's recent and innovative *The Americas in the Age of Revolution, 1750–1850* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1996).