Judas at the Jockey Club

and Other Episodes of Porfirian Mexico

William H. Beezley

University of Nebraska Press Lincoln and London

one of his most famous etchings showing a wheelman on a monstrous bicycle threatening the lives of the people.[165] In traditional recreations, society was divided between those on the shady side and those on the sunny side, but the lower class was notable only by its absence at Mexico's modern sports of baseball, boxing, and bicycling. The gap between los de arriba and los de abajo had widened, helping to create the circumstances in which the 1910 revolution could overturn the Díaz regime, and accentuating this division to the point that it would prevent the revolution from succeeding until the era of Lázaro Cárdenas in the 1930s. To understand this split, we turn now to the material culture and attitudes of Mexico's traditional society.

Rocks and Rawhide in Rural Society: Tools and Technology in Porfirian Mexico

The backwardness of rural Mexico astonished travelers who came to the country during the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz (1876–1911). They expressed surprise at the poverty of the people in this supposed treasure house and shock at the dearth of tools in the homes, fields, and mines. Commentators familiar with the United States and Great Britain had an immediate explanation for what they regarded as stagnation: Mexicans lacked modern technology. Many concluded that Mexico had yet to advance beyond chipped rocks as utensils. These descriptions of Mexican backwardness during the Porfirian years demonstrate the encounter between two cultures, the industrial and the traditional, and provide examples of the symbolic inversions used to label Mexican society as stagnant, ancient, or primitive. The observers asked rhetorically why Mexicans resisted development; then they formulated answers that confirmed Protestant, Anglo-American attitudes about the tropics, Hispanic culture, race mixture, and especially the Roman Catholic Church. Their solutions created opportunities for foreign investors by requiring the panacea of the age: technology.

The Mexican countryside seemed locked in its own stone age. One traveler commented, "Clinging yet with Indian pertinacity to ancient customs, following, even in dress, traditions two or three hundred years

old, they seem as removed from the pressures of changeful events as the fossil remains of another age."[1] Stones served for nearly all the tools used in the household and in the fields. Women ground the meal for tortillas, the basic item in the diet, by using a stone roller on a rectangular, concave stone sheet called the *metate* (the two looked something like a rock rolling pin and washboard), or a smaller stone mortar and pestle (the *molcajete* and the *mano*). Even long-distance pack trains carried this improvised mill, so that when the mules stopped for the night, one muleskinner could grind the corn for the evening and morning meals.[2] No steam- or water-powered village mill reduced the daily drudgery. Women ground maize, a dozen kernels at a time, then patted the *masa* (the damp flour) into a thin, flat circle and toasted it on a hot rock or pottery griddle (the *comal*) resting on the traditional three-stone cooking fire that served as stove.[3] The gentle slapping of the tortillas and their sizzle on the *comal* were the most common sounds of domestic Mexico. No stoves, nor fireplaces, nor kitchens existed. Some cooks had, at best, a shed where the charcoal fire was raised off the ground on a waist-high stone platform, with the three stones replaced by a brazier cut from a kerosene tin. A woven-straw fan whipped the fire to gleaming readiness; the charcoal did not smoke, so the Mexicans constructed no chimneys.[4]

The tortilla served as Mexico's daily bread and its dinner service. It was rolled into a scoop to dip into the beans or gruel boiling in an earthenware pot; it served, when toasted hard and called a *tostada*, as an edible plate for whatever scraps of meat or vegetable might be available. The housewife needed only a knife, for cutting and chopping, and a clay pot or two. Having cooked for centuries without iron vessels, Mexicans saw no need to change, even if they could have afforded it.[5]

Rural houses, really huts, seemed to demonstrate the same, nearly prehistoric backwardness. Quite probably these dwellings represented the fusion of Aztec and early Spanish flat-roofed styles. The most prevalent flat-roofed buildings were constructed from adobe, sun-baked straw and mud blocks. The scarcity, and consequently the cost, of lumber prohibited the construction of wooden buildings; and the price of wood, the only fuel available, prevented the manufacture of kiln-baked bricks.[6] In a few wooded mountain regions, log houses of notched construction existed. Apparently this corner-timbered style was introduced by Sudeten German miners in the 1530s in Central Mexico, and from the United States in the second half of the nineteenth century in Mexico's far north.[7] In the *tierra caliente*, the tropical zone, the people constructed their huts out of saplings and leaves, usually stuccoed with mud. Whether adobe, wattle, or log, these one-room dwellings had no windows and no flooring but packed earth mixed with ashes. Doorways provided the only source of ventilation and sunlight.[8]

Roofs were the most costly and the most difficult part of the construction. Whenever possible, the roofs were saved and used again. In the mining camps of Michoacán, the palm thatch roofs would be carried away by the miners when they abandoned one camp for another.[9] When thatch was not used, the roofs were made by laying rows of poles across the top of the walls, then covering these with one or two feet of dirt and over the dirt a layer of pine boards. The lumber was the most expensive part of the house.[10] One mining camp superintendent from San Francisco found in Huehuepán, Durango, that it was cheaper to rent a roof than to have one built.[11]

The residents of these huts lived essentially without furniture, having as a rule neither chairs, tables, nor beds. Mats, called *petates*, served as sleeping pallets. A few rural Mexicans, slightly higher on the social scale, might have a bed frame constructed of four mounds of clay, crossed with rough boards. No one had mattresses; none had bedding. Men slept in their clothes, wrapped in their *sarapes* when it was cold. Women curled up in their clothes and covered up with their *rebozos*. Because a person usually only owned the clothes he wore, chests were unnecessary. What extra items the family owned hung on pegs or were suspended from the ceiling logs. The earthen pottery, in all sizes, served not only for cooking but also for storage. The only decoration within the house was a paper picture of the Virgin of Guadalupe or one of the saints.[12]

The houses had no heating because the cold was not so extreme as to make it absolutely necessary. In the towns of the higher elevations, including the capital city, the mornings were cool and the winter months often bone-chilling, with occasional ice and every four or five years even snow. Shivering in the cold, Mexicans did as the Italians did and went out in the sun to get warm; indoors they wrapped up as well as they could. Moreover, the cost of fuel was so high that few could have afforded to heat their hovels even if they had had fireplaces or stoves. Wealthy hacienda owners bought hearth rugs to use as saddle blankets, as they had no

fireplaces.[13] What disturbed the Anglo-American commentators more than the cold was the absence of the hearth and, consequently, the family life they knew. "The home, as we understand it, does not exist," wrote H. H. Bancroft, who explained, "The absence of fire-places indicates one great obstacle to those family reunions which have so important an influence on our society."[14] These amateur sociologists concluded that without these gatherings the Mexicans lacked the family structure that served as the building block of society. Victorian conventional wisdom made the family the best hope for the preservation of moral order. The missing chimneys signified that Mexicans, without properly constituted families, were indeed primitive, and doomed to immorality and disorder.[15]

Near nakedness confirmed to foreigners and urban, upper-class Mexicans that what they saw in the country was the primitive life of ignoble savages. The vast majority of these Mexicans walked barefooted or wore only sandals. If they had *huaraches,* they made them of rawhide or plaited fibers, fastened to the foot with strings of the same material. This footwear was so easily made and repaired that every poor Mexican, no matter what might be his other occupation, was his own shoemaker.[16]

Even with sandals, some Indians remained outside the influence of Mexican society. Just as the Spanish colonial government had tried to regulate clothing, Porfirian officials unsuccessfully issued hat and pants laws.[17] Indian men continued to wear only a breech cloth and the women only a few yards of cloth that they wrapped around themselves. They wore these clothes even if they took a few days' work at a hacienda or were hired on for a longer time in one of the mining camps.[18] The first step toward acculturation by an Indian came with the decision to acquire the fashions of the Mexican countryside. What clothes the rural Mexican had were made of unbleached cotton cloth. Men wore collarless and buttonless shirts and pants with long legs that covered the feet. A twisted-fiber or leather thong served as the belt. Many observers expressed suspicion about the character of these men who wore their shirts outside their pants.[19] Each campesino had his *sarape,* the often rather brightly colored woolen blanket that served as a jacket, rain poncho, and bedding. This Mexican topped off his costume with the most expensive *sombrero* he could afford. Ignoring the turn-of-the-century maxim that one should "keep the head cool, and the feet warm," the Mexican who could afford it

bought a heavy, hot, felt sombrero. If he could not purchase felt, he bought a substitute of straw. Whatever the material, the broader the brim and the taller the crown, the more admired the sombrero.[20] This fashion attitude could be summed up as "a 25-dollar hat and a 25-cent pair of guaraches."[21] The Mexican would gladly pay a hundred pesos for his hat; those who could did so.

Rural women also had a limited wardrobe. If they did not go barefooted, then they wore the same sandals as the men. Their dress was a tuniclike garment made of white cotton, with a petticoat of the same material, although brightly colored if the owner could afford it.[22] This chemise left bare the head, neck, shoulders, and legs below the knees. The costume, proper Victorian travelers declared, "commenced too late above and stopped too soon below."[23] Many women agreed and covered their shoulders and necks with their rebozos.

In place of the serape and sombrero worn by the man, the typical woman of the countryside had her *rebozo.* This shawl usually was dyed blue, and if not, it was gray.[24] The woman wrapped it around her for protection against the cold and draped it around her head as a shield against the sun and rain. Pulled low to the eyes, it offered, if not anonymity, at least socially approved modesty; during fiestas, tossed around the shoulders, it became an ornament; at night, it served as a blanket or pillow. One end could be used to flirt with a lover, the way the woman in the parlor used her fan. The mother folded one end, so it held a baby, and then wrapped it around her neck so the child hung on her chest as she went about her chores.[25] The rebozo, perhaps of some brighter color, was worn by the lower-class women of the towns and the poor districts of Mexico City, but the blue or gray rebozo marked the gender, origin, and status of the lower-class woman from the country.[26]

The life in rural Mexico—food, clothing, and shelter—seemed stone age, primitive, and backward. The quality of this existence one traveler placed well below the luxury of modern, nineteenth-century civilization and only slightly above the vicissitudes of the life of the Plains Indians. He concluded that life in rural Mexico was greatly inferior to the scarce comforts of slavery in the antebellum southern United States.[27]

This portrait of prehistoric backwardness received confirmation by the absence of watches, vehicles, and machines. Mexicans did not make watches, and virtually no one used them.[28] In near disbelief, a traveling

New York Times reporter wrote that Mexicans scarcely understood the use of the wheel. Freight, he learned, traveled not in wagons but on the backs of mules and, even more often, on the backs of men.[29] Strangers to Mexico, beginning with the Spanish conquistadors, never failed to remark on the tremendous strength and ubiquity of the native porters, called *tamemes,* seen tottering under huge loads as they lurched down the street. Mule trains reached even the nearly forgotten corners of the country, expecially if a mine were in the vicinity. Mexico City's enterprising businessmen might form partnerships with foreigners to build railroads to ship their ore and freight, but the goods destined for barter among Mexicans continued to travel on the backs of men and mules throughout the years of Porfirian Mexico.

The image of backwardness extended to agriculture as well. So primitive seemed the tools and techniques that observers remarked that Mexico had not advanced beyond the methods of cultivation used in ancient Egypt. Retarded technology characterized agriculture throughout the country, and Solomon Griffin, a New England journalist, wrote that the sight of this rural life would "prejudice some Yankee farmers forever against Mexico."[30]

No implement better demonstrated the stunted agrarian technology than the Mexican plow. This basic implement, centuries old and modeled on the one used in medieval Andalusia and probably earlier in ancient Egypt, was a long tree branch, with a crook, sometimes faced with iron, serving as the plowshare. An ox powered this one-handled implement. Mexicans hooked it to the horns in such a way that the animal pushed rather than pulled. This often strained the animal's neck muscles to the point that on occasion it could not bend its neck, and could drink only by wading mouth-deep in the water. On those ranches that did import plows from the United States in the 1890s, peons took a machete and hacked off one handle, so that the new device looked as much as possible like the traditional implement; nor did the workers alter their method of yoking the oxen, even when neck bows were available.[31]

Adjusting to the Mexican market, one Illinois farm implement company began manufacturing a one-handled plow to export south of the border.[32] This implement survived into the twentieth century. Sociologist Norman S. Hayner, as recently as 1940, reported that 95 percent of the plows used in Oaxaca were these wooden, one-handled tools, called

appropriately *egipcios,* recognizing the ancient origins. Nearer the United States border, in Nuevo León, only 10 percent of the plows were *egipcios.*[33]

Other agricultural implements were unavailable or unused in Mexico. Fieldhands harvested wheat with a sickle with saw-teeth rather than a smooth blade and without a cradle to catch the grain. Once collected, the grain was threshed by spreading it in a corral and allowing the animals to trample it for two or three days. One improvement in this process was to move the grain to a stone floor where the animals were driven around and around to complete the separation of wheat from chaff.[34] Peons had to drive the sheep, goats, or mules around for hours, and when the process was completed often dirt and animal filth had become mixed with the grain. Foreigners demonstrated threshers in Mexico. One *hacendado* learned that with the machine he could replace a dozen workers and twice that many animals and thresh his wheat in one quarter of the time. The village priest came to see the machine and declared it was possessed by the devil and forbade the peons to work with it. The American owner had to ship the machine out of the region to prevent the workers from destroying it.[35] Fieldhands near Silao in the 1890s wrecked a threshing machine because of their opposition to it.[36] Other Mexican foremen and farmers objected to these machines because they left the straw whole. When animals trampled the straw, they left it ready for immediate use as fodder.[37]

Mexicans ignored what Yankees regarded as basic tools and techniques. North of the Rio Grande, milking a cow was a twice-a-day chore and was done by sitting on a stool, while the animal stood in its stall. South of the river boundary milking was done only once a day, out in the field. The milker lassoed and tied together the cow's hind legs, then squatted beside the animal and collected the milk in an earthenware pot rather than a bucket.[38]

Shovels and wheelbarrows existed in Mexico, but only foreigners used them. When excavating and moving dirt, Mexicans tied a piece of rawhide between two poles and moved the earth on this stretcher.[39] In other instances, workers used a horn spoon to scoop up earth, ore, or metal and load it into a leather bag, called a *zurrón,* which was then transported to the chosen spot. They followed these methods even when they had shovels and could toss the shovelfuls of dirt the necessary distance.[40]

North American contractors imported wheelbarrows to use in building the railroads and other projects, such as the Baptist church in the capital city. Mexican workmen were coaxed into using them, but not in the way the foreigners expected. One laborer working on the church loaded his wheelbarrow with bricks, lifted it onto his head, and trudged over to the masons. After emptying it, he replaced the wheelbarrow on his head and returned to the brick pile for another load. Foremen reported similar actions by workmen on railroad construction crews, leaving the bosses shaking their heads in disbelief.[41]

Irrigation techniques remained simple. Often the peons dipped water out of streams with pottery jugs and poured it into ditches. In other instances, they used a long sapling resting in the notch of an upright log as a boom with an earthen pot attached to it to scoop up the water. These methods remained the same as those practiced thousands of years earlier along the Nile.[42] No farmer rotated his crops. Year after year the Mexican cultivator continued to plant and harvest exactly the same crop he had grown the year before. Nor did he rest his fields. Both practices were evidence to foreigners that Mexicans did not understand scientific farming.[43]

Mining boomed in modern Mexico, with an influx of foreign engineers and investors, but this new wave of activity resulted in few changes in traditional mining techniques or in the use of mining or smelting machinery. The two factors that worked against changes or innovation were the low wages of workers, meaning that owners had little incentive to import labor-saving machines, and the isolation of most mines, beyond the nascent transportation system, so that all goods had to be shipped by mule. Stamp mills, for example, had to be dismantled into three-hundred-pound lots for shipment by muleback. Nearly all mining supplies for the Sierra Madre mines came from San Francisco, California, by steamer to Mazatlán or Michoacán or by rail to El Paso, Texas, then to Jiménez, Chihuahua. From Mazatlán and Jiménez, the goods had to be packed into the mountains.[44]

The mines differed little during the Porfirian years from what they had been in the colonial era. Workmen cut a short tunnel into the hillside and then dug straight down. They climbed in and out of this pit on poles, eight to ten feet in length with the bark stripped off, and notches cut for hand and foot grips. A series of these poles allowed the workers to descend several hundred feet into the pit. Long, low tunnels were cut into the side by the miners attempting to trace the ore veins.[45]

In the shaft, the drillers (*barrateros*) swung steel-tipped iron rods, instead of picks, to tear loose the ore and prepare holes for blasting. These *barrateros* comprised an elite in this underground society, with somewhat higher wages as well.[46] In other mines, steel wedges did the work of drills and blasting. Workmen used the wedges to sledge out the minerals.[47] Once the ore had been freed, carriers collected it in bullhide sacks. The miner placed a trumpline around his forehead and lifted the bag, weighing 150 to 200 pounds, onto his back, and began the ascent on the pine logs that served as ladders. Often the carrier had to steady the bag with one hand and climb with the other. This was an extremely hazardous and low-paying job.[48]

Outside the mine, the workers emptied their sacks on the dump, usually protected by a thatched roof. If the mine had no stamp mill, workmen crouched around the dump, cracking lumps of ore into powder between two flat stones. Later the crushed ore was put in a wooden trough and water poured over it. In many instances the workmen had to carry the water to the troughs, again using their bullskin bags. After the washing, the ore was sacked in two-hundred-pound bags for shipment to the smelter. This was the technique, for example, at La China mine in the tierra caliente of Michoacán. The workers earned an average of eighteen to twenty cents a day for this employment.[49]

Mines located nearer to transportation centers or with stronger financial backing often had stamp mills. At these mines, machines crushed the ore: first a rock breaker reduced it to pieces about the size of a walnut, and then a battery, consisting of iron stamps, each weighing about 750 pounds, fell about seven inches and dropped ninety times a minute to complete the work. The powder was placed in tanks of water and agitated, and then quicksilver was added to the mixture. This solution was drained off into settling pans and circulated for several hours to assist the amalgamation process, then sent through sluice boxes leading to the tailings pit. The amalgam, after being collected, was placed in a retort, connected by an iron tube to a glass retainer for catching the quicksilver after it had been freed and had condensed. The retort was heated with a good fire, vaporizing the mercury and leaving the metal (mostly silver) as a residue.[50]

One engineer estimated that using these techniques Mexican miners took away about 60 percent of the metal contained in the raw ore. Scavengers who worked the tailings recovered additional amounts of silver. These workmen also collected a fair quantity of mercury, which they resold to the mines. One traveler saw them sorting through the ore remains and reported that they worked only with their hands and a flat, shingle-like piece of wood. This same traveler saw one man with a shovel, something so extraordinary that he had to record it for his readers.[51]

The metal was melted and run into bars for shipment to the mint. Mule trains, called *conductas,* carried the bullion out of the Sierra Madre to either Culiacán, Sinaloa, or to Parral, Chihuahua. When it went to Parral, it was reshipped by stage to Jiménez and then by rail to the mint in Chihauhua City. The leader of the *conducta,* who was one of the most trusted men in the mining camp, usually took only a handful of well-armed men with him to guard the bullion and to bring back several thousand dollars in coin. The danger of robbery was slight because of the weight of the bars and the coins that made escape slow and difficult.[52]

Improvisation, rather than imported machines, served in all the mines of Mexico. Using materials near at hand, the Mexicans made what they needed. If a hoisting rope was called for, they made it by spinning a larger diameter cable of hemp, sisal, or whatever fiber they had for cordage. Bullskin bags replaced buckets, and the wooden windlass, called a *malcate,* turned on wooden axletrees by teams of horses or mules, served in place of the cast-iron steam-driven hoist used in modern mining operations.[53]

Throughout the countryside, Mexican workers resorted to rawhide to improve and repair tools. One commentator concluded that what a Mexican could not do with rawhide was not worth doing. Thongs yoked the plow to the ox, bound cargoes on the backs of mules, stitched together everything that could be laced, tied rails to fence posts, and held rafters in place. Pins and nails had no place in this society constructed with leather. What the midwestern farmboy did with bailing wire, the Mexican did and more with his rawhide.[54] But, however useful rawhide was for repairing the implements of traditional Mexico, it would not work on machinery. An insurmountable problem for those who wanted to adopt modern implements and machines was the absence of spare parts. If an imported

tool or machine needed repairs, the native blacksmith could not fix it, especially if it were made of cast-iron. The implement was tossed aside.[55]

Discarded tools and the lack of machines gave mute evidence to foreigners of Mexican primitiveness. Besides the absence of machinery, the other indicators of change—which travelers so ardently believed revealed progress—registered no economic or population growth, nor political or social convolutions. This apparent inactivity indicated not a stagnant society but rather the resiliency of rural Mexico.

Although it was not apparent in short-term reports, this society, like other rural civilizations, did undergo immense fluctuations (such as population changes) over long periods and even experienced, at times, the convulsions of famine and epidemic disease. Yet what characterized this countryside was its hardshell resistance to change, effected by its ability to recover from the jolts of both windfall bounty and sudden calamity. What distinguished rural Mexico was its stability.[56] "Balance mechanisms" restored its equilibrium whenever it was temporarily or accidentally upset.[57] The essence of this equilibrium found expression in marginal existence, in poverty. The same mechanisms that helped the culture recover also prevented the improvement of living conditions. If increased food became available (because the area had suffered population loss, for example), the local community grew in numbers until it regained approximately the same level of deprivation; if famine struck the region, starvation continued until death and reduced births restored the balance. Moreover, the people of Mexico's rural society reached an accommodation with their situation that prevented any effort to change it.[58]

Faced with an apparently unending situation, rural Mexicans lost hope. They became resigned to their lot in life. Poverty was hard enough; few wanted to compound this hardship with the frustration of vain efforts to change these conditions. Those who could not accept this life escaped it by fleeing to the towns, or to work on railroads, or even across the frontier to the United States.[59] Those who stayed behind learned how to make the best they could of their lives. They coped with poverty.

These rural Mexicans still found solace and pleasure in their culture that did not expect or seek constant change. Their community rested on traditions, especially distinctive conceptions of both time and work. Here

no one needed minutes or hours, when morning and afternoon, evening and night served as small enough designations. Except for Mexico City and one or two other cities that had imported clocks for their municipal buildings, the provincial towns shared the countryside's indifference to the hour. Each town had its own local time, which varied by ten or fifteen minutes from its neighbor's, so that the nation possessed a crazy quilt of time zones.[60] In sedentary communities it mattered little; traditional society had a distinctive rhythm tied to agricultural seasons and the liturgical calendar, itself derived from changes in nature.

The nonindustrial world of the countryside made no division between work and leisure. The distinction had no meaning. Work involved more than labor; it included a sense of accomplishment, pleasure in the task, and camaraderie. In this society, work helped strengthen family ties and community solidarity through shared tasks and celebrations. Fiestas seemed the only recreation for these people, but these were more than leisure activities; they had to be celebrated or dire consequences faced the villagers. The compulsion, the cost to the sponsors, and the obligation to perform the ceremonies precisely made work, not play, of these celebrations.[61] But work did not have the onerous definition of the modern world and nonwork had not become leisure. The workmen who finished one chore before day's end began another; no one rushed to finish what was a pleasurable task.

Time was money to foreign travelers, and they could not understand this traditional society that existed beyond copper wages and the clock. Those Mexicans who knew something of the other world recognized that there time meant work, and work yielded not money but only coupons or credits at the company store. Moreover, working men and women in both the traditional and the modern worlds probably recognized that producing any surplus would more than likely lead to it's being expropriated by local elites through taxation or some other form of exploitation. Working, with this in mind, prevailed over any need to hurry.[62] Rejecting this conception of time and money, they found no reason to save either.

This astonished visitors to the country. "The lack of labor-saving appliances," wrote the *Times* correspondent, "is very striking."[63] After living in the mining camp of Guadalupe y Calvo for five years in the 1880s, J. R. Flippin said that Mexicans did not care "for the new-fangled labor-saving machinery of the nineteenth century."[64] Indolence seemed the

major characteristic of these rural Mexicans. Flippin remarked that the peons "often dawdle and putter in a way that would be wildly exasperating further north," and Henry Howard Harper described these people as "indigent, lazy and utterly devoid of ambition."[65] These reporters rejected the possibility that they had observed a traditional culture, one in which an accommodation had been reached with the conditions of life, including poverty.

In fact, these commentators determined that poor and backward were identical conditions. The cause for one was the cause for the other; the solution for one was the solution for the other. The identification of poverty and backwardness was the first of a series of explanations that started from the fact of poverty and grew into elaborate constructs of the culture and behavior of rural Mexicans. These formulations served to justify the presence of foreign experts and to make plausible the programs of foreign technology.

One of the earliest of these explanations turned on geography. Latitude placed much of Mexico in the tropics, and several travelers blamed the sloth of the people and the underdevelopment of the countryside on the enervating influence of this climate. Typical comments included, "The climatic lassitude infects every process" and the peons behaved as they did "by virtue of climatic and other conditions that surround them."[66] Of course, this argument came from those who had been reared in colder and therefore they believed, hardier environments.

Other common explanations followed this pattern of reasoning: neither the United States nor Great Britain was poor, but Mexico was; the difference, therefore, could be found by locating the differences between Anglo-American and Mexican culture. Three common explanations resulting from this logic blamed the system of land tenure, the heritage of Spanish colonial rule, or the influence of the Roman Catholic Church for the economic stagnation.[67] These factors certainly helped to mold the culture of rural Mexico, but they did not account for its poverty in the nineteenth century.

John Coatsworth has examined these themes and determined that not one nor any combination of them caused Mexican backwardness. The major obstacles to economic growth were the inadequate transportation network and the ineffectual economic organization (that is, the legislative and juridical environment was unfavorable to entrepreneurs).[68] The

developers who confronted these obstacles were in Mexico City and were men who had refused to make an accommodation with poverty. These promoters overcame the difficulties with Porfirio Díaz's help, especially his lavish assistance to the railroads and extremely friendly legislative and juridical cooperation with entrepreneurs. Nevertheless, the explanations for Mexico's faltering progress remained unchanged.

Protestant, Anglo-American travelers, often in search of economic opportunities for themselves or to describe conditions for prospective investors among their readers, regularly blamed the Spanish heritage, the Catholic church, or the great estates for the stagnant countryside. Their descriptions demonstrate how these observers took the fact of Mexican poverty and used it to justify characterizations of the Mexicans based on opposites of the traits of Anglo-American society. Because Americans were rich (by comparison), they were also modern and progressive; because Mexicans were poor, they were also described as primitive and backward. This kind of symbolic inversion, in some instances, extended to racial characterizations, which portrayed Mexicans as "a weak, effete, mongrel, withered race,"[69] and pejorative remarks about Mexican cleanliness, which alleged they tolerated "all kinds of filth within arm's length of the door."[70] The lack of public sanitation and of personal hygiene received severe criticism and the conclusion was that "filth and stench fill their hovels and the wonder is how they survive so long the unwholesome conditions."[71]

Curiously, those Mexicans who could not be described as being dirty were pictured as depraved. These "Indians" went to ditches and streams where they washed their clothes and spread them on the banks to dry. Then men, women, and children "promiscuously" scrubbed and splashed around, completely nude in the water. Covered only by the blue sky, all these people seemed to enjoy themselves and seemed utterly unconscious of the modesty demanded by foreign observers.[72]

Whether dirty or obscene, the country Mexican appeared to lack the sobriety that Anglo-Americans viewed as the mother of industry. Cheap pulque sired the drunk peon, who was quick to anger, quicker to violence; quick to betrayal, and quicker to robbery. The rural Mexican, quaffing liters of pulque, became absolutely disagreeable and thoroughly dangerous.

Pulque was the drink of the people. This mildly alcoholic beverage, as

well as tequila and mescal, came from the maguey plant cultivated in fields holding up to seven hundred plants. The mature, eight-year-old plant produced for about five months, during which time it yielded 360 gallons of pulque.[73] This liquid was poured into whole pigskins that looked like the live animals with legs dumbly kicking in the air. These pigskin bags were shipped to town.[74] What Mexicans cherished others could scarcely tolerate. Stanton Kirkham sampled it and reported, "It tastes like poor cider and smells like old cheese," while his countryman Alfred Coffin snorted, "Just liquid filth, no more, no less."[75] For personal use, Mexicans reduced the smell by adding sugar and other flavors. The owners of *pulquerías,* according to Coffin, "added a quantity of marihuana to the cask, and presto! he has the regulation Kentucky tanglefoot, warranted to kill at forty rods." This drink supposedly could make a person's eyes look two ways at once.[76] Another visitor declared that pulque looked and smelled like buttermilk with the addition of rotten eggs.[77] Howard Conkling spoke for all his fellow travelers when he said, "one must practice to like it."[78] And Mary Blake concluded, "It no doubt has virtues, but they are well hidden; and if, as they claim, one can become intoxicated by prolonged drinking, it is the sourest, thinnest, saddest means of reaching exhilaration that the mind of man ever conceived."[79] Drinking pulque was the universal habit in Mexico. The common price for this popular drink was three cents a quart. Drinking it tended to magnify the character of the people. "In the wide universe, I venture to affirm," wrote Flippin, "there is no tougher character than the drunken peon. . . . The Mexican who does not drink and get drunk is the dead Mexican."[80]

In all these descriptions we find these Euclids of ethnology developing the geometry of culture. Their logic started from an analogy between the theorem that parallel lines never intersect and the theorem that cultures acted in exactly the same way. Anglo-Americans saw themselves as sober, industrious, and honest. Mexicans were different; they were poor, so they must also be drunk, lazy, and dishonest. They were disorderly, even lawless, but the Díaz government had suppressed banditry on the national level, so these descriptions attributed thievery to the individuals of the poorer classes, who exercised this predilection especially when the peon got drunk.[81]

Developing the stereotype of the indolent peon fit into the general

ideology of the United States and the western European nations intent on expansion of trade or empire or both. The myth of the lazy native justified commercial or colonial occupation as a reform of a backward society. In reality, it was those who rejected the foreign intrusion and changes or who saw little gain in hard work when the profits went to outsiders who were branded as slothful Mexicans.[82]

In working out this paradigm of Mexican characteristics, even more important than latitude or ethnic background as a determining factor was the Roman Catholic Church. Foreign travelers pointed to numerous characteristics that they argued sprang from the Mexican's religion. Protestants criticized the devotion to saints, which seemed like pantheism. Mexicans celebrated many saints' days, and it was reported that they "generally take occasion to wind up the day in some drunken orgies."[83] Medical practices also depended to a large extent on these saints. Before any sick person received a prescribed remedy, the saint had to be called upon to bless the medicine with healing power. If the patient recovered, the saint received the credit; if the patient died, the saint was never blamed; the people thought that he had been disinclined to interpose his power perhaps because he had been unappeased for some unintended affront. The conclusion from abroad was, "Where this saint worship prevails to a large extent you may rest assured that its devotees are poor, ignorant and priest-ridden."[84]

Thus commentators, both foreign and Mexican, had two parallel columns of traits that rested on the factual foundation of Anglo-American wealth and Mexican poverty. The observers then used the attributes or ideals of Anglo-American society in one column and tabulated their exact opposites to describe rural Mexicans. After describing the backwardness of the Mexican countryside, observers proposed a method of improvement, one that included what they had near at hand: technology and capital. Their depictions revealed how they took an ideal from their culture, in this case technology, and then endowed the Mexicans with its opposite. This symbolic inversion can be used to justify prejudice, lower social status, slavery, or war,[85] but in this instance it was used as the rationalization for programs of modernization that required the importation of foreign machines and investment funds.

The British first fell victim to this kind of thinking in 1824. With

nothing more than the belief that Mexicans were backward, they deluded themselves into believing that all Mexico needed for development was capital investment and applied technology. They expected substantial profits and immediate success in mining. The British minister, Henry George Ward, marveled at his countrymen who had no concern for "industry, perseverance, a knowledge of the scene upon which operations were to commence—of the men by whom they were to be conducted,—of the language and peculiarities of the country, in which they were carried on." To the investors, all these considerations were of minor importance, and their investments failed almost immediately. By 1828, bankrupt British managers blamed Mexicans, "their backwardness, their infernal sloth, and popish religion." The British faith remained unshaken in capital and technology as the means to achieve profits for themselves and to accomplish modernization, definded as economic development, in the rest of the world.[86] This was exactly the same process used by the United States government experts after World War II who devised aid programs for the underdeveloped world. "The remedy," wrote John Kenneth Galbraith, "included the diagnosis. Having vaccine, we identified smallpox. Only by accident could a therapy so selected be successful. There was, alas, no such accident."[87] Nor did such an accident occur, despite tremendous efforts at providing technology and capital, in Porfirian Mexico.

Not just foreigners accepted the descriptions of Mexico as backward. Those Mexicans who sought to build their society in the image of the industrial nations accepted these characterizations of Mexican society and the technological panacea offered. When foreign technology did not re-create Mexico in this image during the Porfiriato, they concluded it must be the nature of the Mexican that caused its failure. This contributed to the national inferiority complex described by Samuel Ramos.[88] Of course, this sense of inferiority affected only the elite; it had no impact on those people who lived in rural Mexico.

Retarded agriculture, mining, and transportation were all the result of the constant repetition of ancient techniques. David Wells, writing in 1885, declared, "The fruits of the soil and the results of individual labor have been repeating themselves for hundreds of years." He continued, "Men have died, but others do the same thing from generation to

generation."[89] No one was going to take major risks as long as life in the countryside for the vast majority was lived on the margin of existence. Risk involved not just one crop but survival for the entire family.[90]

These retrogressive habits would soon scatter before the "march of improvement," according to Solomon Griffin and other sons of American technology, if only Mexicans witnessed new techniques and tools in action. But, besides its unwillingness to take risks, rural Mexico had experience that provided it with great resilience. Occasionally, foreigners learned about the inner strength of this poor society.

Henry Harper made a journey in 1896 with two other prospective investors to the Huasteca region (the coastal strip from Tampico south to Veracruz) in search of promising agricultural opportunities. After a boat trip filled with delays, encounters with wood ticks and mosquitos, hardships and cussedness of both man and geography, they arrived at Tuxpam, expecting a land of promising coffee, rubber, sugar, and citrus plantations. They were disappointed. His friends gave up, but eventually Harper purchased a cattle ranch from another American who was retiring after thirty years in Mexico. Harper believed that the region needed only the application of American energy and technology to reap substantial profits. His first effort in applying his nation's know-how was to instruct this foreman to borrow the imported steel plow that had been sitting unused for years in town and plow one field for corn. Villagers, who had already planted their corn using traditional digging sticks or the centuries-old wooden plow, sauntered to the field to watch the steel implement do its work; when the plowing and planting were finished, they left without comment.

In the months that followed, Harper seemed vindicated: the corn grew quickly, soon stretching above a man's head, with the large ears almost out of reach. But Mexico would teach him a hard lesson. A summer storm blew through Tuxpam and its countryside. Heavy winds ripped up the entire cornfield, because the root system could not hold the stalks in the loose soil that had been deeply plowed with steel. The surrounding *milpas,* with shorter corn stalks sticking out of nearly rock-hard ground, suffered no damage from the winds. The hard soil, punctured only by the wooden sticks, held the roots, keeping the stalks and the seasons' harvest upright.

Harper abandoned his efforts to introduce any new techniques on his

property. After this decision, he reported that he always managed a tidy profit from his crops each year until 1908, when oil was discovered on his land, and he leased his ranch to a foreign company.[91]

Careful examination of the descriptions of rural Mexico reveals offhand comments that demonstrate the accommodation and adjustment of the people to their environment, resources, and poverty. This accommodation and, in many instances, successful adapting of what was available to them would not do for those interested in bringing the latest in technology to Mexico, but their unguarded comments reveal admiration and often praise for the adjustments of this rural society. The Mexican villages, because they had been constructed of adobe, rather than costly wood, had what William Seymour Edwards called "an air of substantial solidarity, quite lacking in American wooden towns."[92] These adobes not only looked permanent but also had other desirable attributes: they were fireproof, earthquake resistent, warm in winter, cool in summer, and highly durable. The palm hut in the *tierra caliente* had its merits, especially the way it afforded ventilation.[93]

The clothing that received such severe criticism also demonstrated the way Mexicans accommodated to what resources they had and to what conditions they faced. Going barefoot may have represented abject poverty; wearing sandals may not have. Many commentators have found sandals more healthful than shoes, especially shoes of the Mexican style.[94] The Mexican shoe, described as "an instrument of torture" with a high heel and tooth-pick toe, could hardly be more healthy than the sandal that was "cool, cheap, and did not irritate the feet."[95]

The same could be said about the cuisine and household and agricultural implements. Mexican cuisine, consisting of the pre-conquest complex of maize, beans, squash, and chiles, supplemented occasionally by the colonial additions of eggs, pork or another meat, and cheese, reflects creative adaptation. Maize preparation since time forgotten included soaking the corn kernels in water with small bits of limestone. This procedure loosens the difficult-to-digest sheath of the corn and the limestone multiplies the calcium content to at least twenty times that in the original maize. Scientists believe this process increases the availability of amino acids, extremely important given the scarcity of meat in Mexico. Beans provide protein, and squash, 90 percent water, offers liquid in this arid land and filler to create a satisfied feeling. Chiles serve a

remarkable role, surpassing almost all other plants as a source of Vitamin A and offering substantial amounts of Vitamins C and the B group. They stimulate the appetite and aid digestion by increasing gastric secretions. They even help lower the body temperature because capsaicin produces sweating, with the effect of cooling by evaporation. Moreover, food scientists have shown that chiles inhibit the growth of bacteria, such as staphylococcus, salmonella, and other microorganisms that cause intestinal disorders. Preparation of the food, using few implements, reflects a similar adaptation to the scarcity of fuels. Meals included the quickly cooked tortilla and other foods prepared in small portions for fast cooking over a hot fire that required little wood or charcoal. Baking, roasting, even slow boiling of foods occurred only for holiday or elite meals.[96]

A representative comment about tools by an observer who expressed surprise at the one-handled plow went on: "The marvel is that anything satisfactory can be accomplished with such an awkward instrument, and yet these fields in some instances show grand results."[97] The manager of the *Illinois State Register,* Thomas Rees, a knowledgeable agriculturalist, reported to his readers that even though many Americans had disparaged Mexico's wooden plow, he did not think that in the hands of the Mexican peon a steel plow could do any better. Moreover, he argued that the wooden plow was better suited to Mexico, where the soil was loose and ordinarily full of stones of all sizes and shapes. The best modern plow, he explained, would quickly be cut to pieces by the rocks and soon be unfit for use. Meanwhile, the wooden plow would slide to the side of stones, take more of a pounding, and survive a long time before suffering much harm. The great advantage of the steel plow, its ability to cut deeper and wider furrows, was not needed in Mexico, where farmers only needed to scratch the field's surface. This agricultural journalist from one of the leading farm states praised the Mexican plowman, saying that once he had finished a field with his one-handled wooden implement, "it is very well done and looks very nice, and is just exactly what they want."[98]

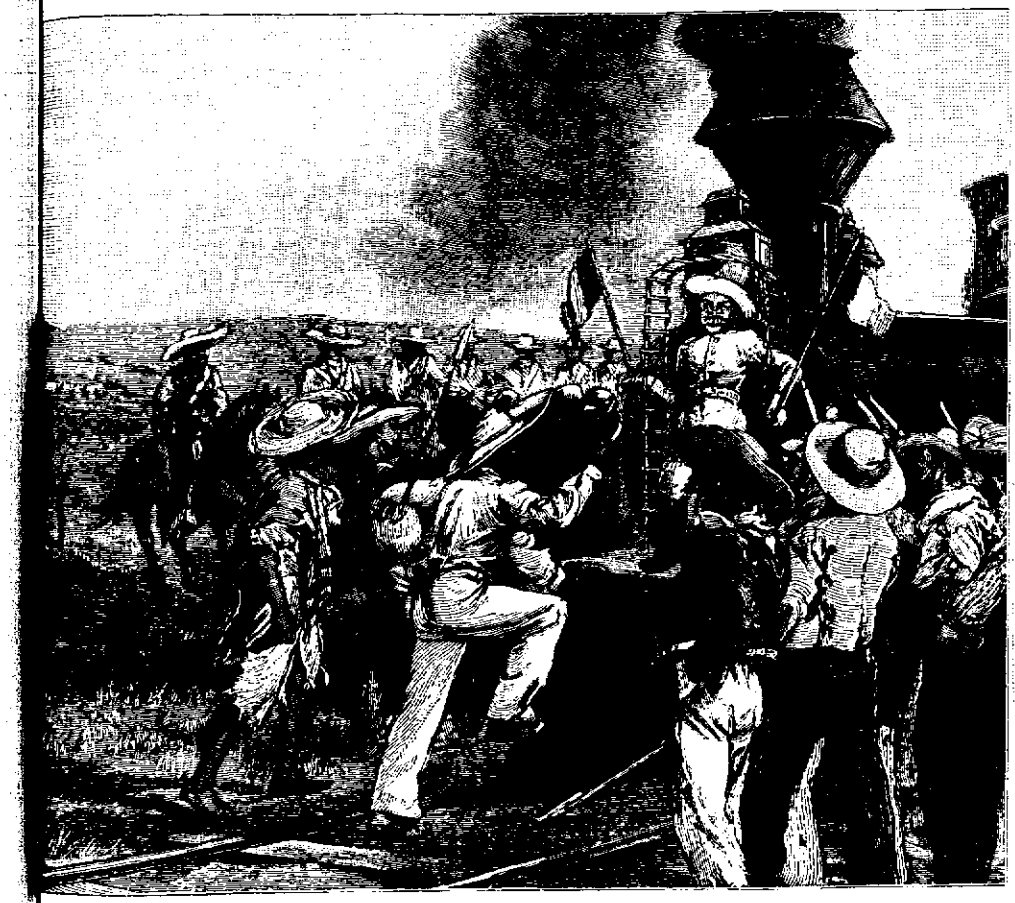
Henry Harper went even further in his praise of the accommodation achieved in rural Mexico. He told prospective settlers in Mexico, "If you would farm successfully in Mexico you must farm precisely as they do." From his own experience Harper had learned that the outsider "will eventually find that there is one well-grounded reason for every common usage."[99] Ultimately the resilience of this rural society rested on the fact that rural Mexicans took nothing for granted; life was a day-by-day venture. This recognition, more than anything else, divided Mexican from American culture. Scrapping and scurrying for the little bit extra that could be set aside for the future made no sense to rural Mexicans, when, in light of starvation and disease, as someone remarked, "who has promised us tomorrow?" Nonetheless, Harper praised the Mexicans for the life they managed, saying they were "clever enough to make the best of conditions." Rees concurred with Harper's judgment; he explained that "when the poverty of the people is considered, they deserve great credit for what they have achieved."[100]

Workingmen were not the only Mexicans who received recognition. The women earned commendation from Mary Blake, who had traveled from Boston to Mexico City. "Are we beyond taking a lesson?" she asked, and then praised the Mexican mother's method of carrying her small children in a rebozo that placed the child's weight on her shoulders rather than her arms. Blake applauded as well the exquisitely clean streets which she believed should make any American blush with shame at the thought of the filth in New York and Chicago.[101]

Rooted in the countryside, these Mexicans during the Porfirian years had little hope for a better lot in life. Some had the experience of travel, at least in the form of a pilgrimage to Guadalupe or one of the other shrines. But these experiences, by their nature, were outside ordinary activities (called liminoid by anthropologists), like election days in the United States, with little carryover to everyday life except to strengthen the community's resiliency.[102] It was the sawed-off politician Francisco I. Madero, who traversed the nation, giving speech after speech, in 1910, that awoke the possibility of changing one's situation. In that way he was the most revolutionary of the early twentieth-century revolutionaries. But his promise of hope was fleeting, and his successors had to face the rock-ribbed resilience of rural Mexico, one in which new tools and technologies were shunted aside, whether promoted by foreign entrepreneurs or revolutionary politicians.

Everyday Mexicans during the Porfirian years found solace, even humor at times, in their traditions. The secular festivals that complemented the religious celebrations offered them the opportunity to release pent-up frustrations and parody those who wanted to destroy their

way of life. The Porfirian Liberals attacked traditional Mexico by restricting the church and seizing village lands. These Mexicans under siege confronted modern life in the countryside and the city, and fought to preserve their customs through Judas burnings, Day of the Dead rituals, and Carnival. Each of these folk events had an element of humor, which anthropologist Paul Stoller calls the comedy of paradox, used to resist the influence of an overwhelming foreign culture of modernity.[103] A struggle for the nation's cultural identity ensued, which can be seen in the celebrations of Judas Day at the Jockey Club.



"Railroad Judas, 1882," a sketch by William Henry Bishop in *Old Mexico and Her Lost Provinces* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1883).