

THE “PERFECT DICTATORSHIP,” 1940–1968

It is an attempt to overthrow the government. They have already succeeded in making the union abandon the official party *en masse*; if this continues, how will you sustain yourselves, Mr. Undersecretary? Yes . . . that's the only way: to declare the strike non-existent, to send them to the army, to destroy them with the blows of clubs, and to jail their leaders.

— CARLOS FUENTES, *THE DEATH OF ARTEMIO CRUZ*

On October 2, 1968, approximately five thousand student protesters assembled peaceably in the Plaza de las Tres Culturas (Square of the Three Cultures) in the Tlatelolco neighborhood of Mexico City. The square itself represents a conscious effort to remind Mexicans of their long and rich cultural heritage. The ruins of Aztec architecture dominate the center of the square, and a colonial convent lies on the eastern side. A high-rise that houses the Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores (Foreign Relations Ministry) borders the southern side, and a modern public housing complex surrounds the square on the west and north. Carrying banners demanding democratic rights and the release of political prisoners, the students took advantage of the upcoming Olympic Games in Mexico's capital city to focus attention on their demands. They shouted “¿Díaz Ordaz, dónde estás?” (Díaz Ordaz, where are you?) and “No queremos olimpiadas, queremos revolución” (We don't want the Olympics, we want revolution). This personal appeal to the president, Gustavo Díaz Ordaz, a member of a long-ruling party that still referred to itself as “revolutionary,” underscored the time-honored expectation that national leaders can redress popular grievances, just as Cárdenas had done in the 1930s. However, the government's response was not what the students had in mind. Around 6 p.m., tanks and armored cars appeared on the scene, and loudspeakers urged the protesters to disperse. When the students refused to leave, mayhem ensued. According to the most credible sources, a handful of special agents stationed on top of and inside the high-rises opened fire with automatic weapons, targeting both the protesters and the soldiers. In response, the soldiers machine-gunned the crowd, killing a large number of protesters. Popular *corridos* still mourn the death of “four hundred comrades,” but the precise death toll is still unknown, since it appears the state may have removed and burned a number of the bodies.

In one bloody evening, state-sponsored violence had unmasked a system that the Peruvian novelist Mario Vargas Llosa in 1990 would dub the “perfect dictatorship”: a political system that looked like a

democracy but acted like a dictatorship. Since Cárdenas, elections have produced presidents serving nonrenewable six-year terms, and opposition parties have had candidates on the ballot. Yet until 1989 no opposition party was able to win a single state governorship, let alone the presidency. All winners belonged to the “official party”: first the Callista National Revolutionary Party (PNR), then the Cardenista Party of the Mexican Revolution (PRM), and finally, after 1946, the Institutional Revolutionary Party (Partido Revolucionario Institucional, or PRI). Vargas Llosa’s comments referred to this seemingly exceptional position among Latin American nations, especially the rule of one party with relatively little political opposition and a significant degree of consent among the governed. By contrast, most South American countries experienced a high degree of political instability and frequent military coups: between 1964 and 1976 Argentina, Brazil, and Chile all fell under the heavy hand of military rule. Although all three nations had returned to civilian rule by the time Vargas Llosa made his comments, their political systems appeared far more tenuous. One of the most important reasons for the political stability of the PRI system was the party’s claim on the legacy of the Mexican Revolution—a claim tarnished indelibly with the blood of the students at Tlatelolco.

Thus as the sun rose on October 3, 1968, Mexico did not look so different from its authoritarian neighbors to the south. The regime’s invocation of “the Revolution” as the justification for its existence sounded hollow indeed. The country appeared to have come full circle: from the authoritarian Porfiriato through the epic revolution to the authoritarian state of the PRI. As one historian rhetorically inquired in 1966, “Is the Mexican Revolution dead?”¹ Just four years before, another historian had written a book that implied an affirmative answer to this question, postulating that the period 1940–64 marked the transition “from revolution to evolution.”² But the Tlatelolco massacre led scholars to use adjectives such as *demolished*, *abandoned*, and *betrayed* to describe the course of the revolution. Vargas Llosa’s notion of the perfect dictatorship captures these tensions between popular expectations of continued reform and elite strategies to centralize political power by manipulating revolutionary discourse. Over time these tensions could not work themselves out, and ordinary Mexicans found room to articulate their own ideas of what an ever more distant revolution meant to them.

THE INSTITUTIONAL REVOLUTION

Mexico in the 1940s had changed greatly from Porfirian days. Cardenista reforms had shattered the hacienda system, nationalized the oil industry, and brought a political role to organized labor. While a powerful ruling party held sway in ways that Díaz and his allies never had, the political system also included opposition parties such as the conservative National Action Party (PAN). A sizable middle class bought both foreign-made and Mexican-made consumer goods. In the northwestern state of Baja California, vineyards and irrigated fields dotted a landscape that had been a vast expanse of desert only decades before. The country’s communications and infrastructure had undergone significant improvements. In the age of the automobile, roads connected the cities and small towns. Mexico was

becoming a significant tourist destination. Those who could afford movie tickets attended theaters that showed the latest productions from Hollywood and a burgeoning Mexican film industry, and radio brought news, political messages, and music to remote corners of the nation. Yet another mass medium, television, was in its infancy.

Still, in many ways, things had stayed the same. Despite a wave of urbanization brought on by industrialization and flight from the countryside during the decades of violence, Mexico remained a largely rural nation. The 1940 census estimated that almost 65 percent of the population resided in rural areas. The *ejido* system gave the state much of the power that the old hacendados had enjoyed. Real wages had increased, but a great majority of Mexicans remained in poverty, and illiteracy remained high despite the educational crusades of the 1920s and 1930s. Nor had the political revolution delivered liberty to all. As the dark and biting film satire *La Ley de Herodes* (Herod's Law) graphically illustrates, *jefes políticos* still lorded over villagers in rural areas, except they now wore the badge of an official party. As we have seen, controversy and allegations of fraud had followed Manuel Avila Camacho's triumph in the 1940 presidential vote. What the losers perceived as their inability to compete on equal ground left them embittered about a process they considered a farce. And the revolutionary regime continued to disenfranchise and marginalize women; promises to give them suffrage, full rights of land ownership, or even status as *ejidal* beneficiaries had not materialized.

However, if Avila Camacho started his tenure without a strong political mandate, he proved to possess the right political temperament for his time. Also known as the *presidente caballero*, or gentleman president, he desired to heal the remaining fissures among the people—most important, those separating secular from Catholic Mexico. He announced after his inauguration, “I am a believer. . . . I am a Catholic by origin, in moral feeling.”³ Stopping well short of announcing adherence to religious orthodoxy, these declarations indicated the mellowing of the revolution on the anticlerical front. The president postulated that one could be both a revolutionary and a Catholic, and that the church-state conflict would not continue during his administration.

Avila Camacho's *sexenio* (six-year tenure) enjoyed the good fortune of an improving economic and political climate. In particular, the new president took advantage of the stimulus provided by World War II to intensify the process of industrial development that had burgeoned since the late Cárdenas years. With the war, the prices of Mexican export products had skyrocketed, allowing the government to use revenue from these exports to stimulate industrialization. The U.S. entry into the war following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, provided even greater opportunities. In addition, the U.S. wartime economy shifted away from producing exportable consumer products in order to manufacture items needed for the military campaigns in the Pacific and (later) Europe. Not surprisingly Avila Camacho committed his country to full participation in the war. Immediately after Pearl Harbor, he broke relations with the Axis Powers, and in March 1942 his government froze the assets of all Axis nationals. On May 23, 1942, Avila Camacho declared war on the Axis Powers after

German U-boats torpedoed and sank two Mexican oil tankers in the Gulf of Mexico. Within a month, his government had seized all German, Italian, and Japanese businesses and jailed several hundred prominent Nazis. Avila Camacho also sent a squadron to fight in the Pacific theater, and tens of thousands of Mexican Americans fought in the U.S. armed forces.

World War II posed a set of unique challenges to a government that called itself revolutionary. Much of the revolutionary propaganda rested on the idea of economic nationalism, the notion that Mexicans needed to free their means of production from foreign control. In addition, Mexicans remembered the numerous instances in which the United States had intervened in their internal affairs. Just in the thirty short years of the revolution, U.S. troops had occupied their soil twice (Veracruz in 1914 and Chihuahua in 1916–17); U.S. Ambassador Henry L. Wilson had played a crucial role in the overthrow of Madero; and Mexico and the United States had stood on the brink of war during the Calles presidency. The wartime alliance required an effort to forget these recent conflicts, as well as to reach deeper into Mexican history to find a justification for collaborating with the northern colossus. One example was a deeply symbolic film made with the help of Hollywood filmmakers about Benito Juárez's struggle in 1864–67 to rescue his nation from the German-speaking emperor Maximilian. The 1943 film *Mexicanos al grito de Guerra!* (Mexicans to the Shout of War!) not only invoked the first five words of the national anthem; it also recalled a juncture when a heroic Mexican leader had worked with the Lincoln administration during a time of civil war in both the United States and Mexico. The war thus required a tweaking of the official discourse to the effect that “the Revolution” had made Mexico into a modern, democratic, and “Western” nation, eminently suitable as an ally of the United States, Great Britain, and France.

Even more important, the war contributed to Avila Camacho's efforts to promote national unity. In May 1941 he allowed former president Calles to return after five years of exile in San Diego. On September 15, 1942—Independence Day—seven presidents posed on a platform erected on the Zócalo in a great display of national reconciliation. Fittingly, Cárdenas and Calles flanked Avila Camacho from the left and right, respectively, and Adolfo de la Huerta, Emilio Portes Gil, Pascual Ortiz Rubio, and Abelardo Rodríguez also attended. By all accounts, the event passed without an open display of animus. This photo opportunity displayed for all to see that the revolutionary family had finally come together ([figure 7.1](#)).

An excellent example of this rhetorical shift of the official revolutionary party toward a more politically centrist unity is the cult of General Alvaro Obregón, celebrated each year on the anniversary of his assassination on July 17. The ceremony takes place at the Obregón monument in San Angel, Mexico City. As the last major revolutionary leader to die by assassination, Obregón offers an opportunity to highlight national unity and bridge lingering resentments within the party. Not surprisingly it was President Avila Camacho who turned the annual commemoration of Obregón's assassination into a principal vehicle for official reflection on “the Revolution” and the ruling party. Evidence of this

refashioning appeared on July 17, 1941, the first anniversary of the assassination celebrated under the Avila Camacho administration. The association in charge of the Obregón monument transformed Obregón's image as a slain caudillo into that of a national unifier and primary precursor of the ruling party. One of the event's speakers, formerly a close friend of Obregón, told the audience that Cárdenas had destroyed national unity by pitting the campesino against his landlord and the worker against his boss. He lamented that Mexico had "found many destroyers; great distributors of land; great expropriators of private wealth; great thieves of public wealth." "We have deviated," he declared, "from the authentic path of the Revolution."⁴ Thus the speaker constructed the Mexican Revolution as a movement in the political center.



FIGURE 7.1 During World War II, a moment of unity: Abelardo L. Rodríguez, Plutarco Elías Calles, Manuel Avila Camacho, and Lázaro Cárdenas. Fideicomiso Archivos Plutarco Elías Calles y Fernando Torreblanca, Mexico City.

In 1946, Avila Camacho's last year in office, the Partido de la Revolución Mexicana underwent a reorganization and name change that reflected this shift toward the political middle. Unlike Cárdenas, who had brought new popular groups into his political alliance, Avila Camacho sought to put the revolutionary genie back in the bottle in order to focus on economic growth. Nonetheless the ruling elite knew that "the Revolution" as a concept remained critically important not only for political stability but also for the self-identification of the regime. Thus the party renamed itself the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), its name to this day. The structure of the reorganized party eliminated the military sector, a change that signaled the declining importance of military leaders within the party. The new party also concentrated more power in the hands of its National Executive Committee at the expense of the campesino, labor, and government employee sectors that remained vertically incorporated within the party. Four years later the party that did not lose elections even eliminated primaries—one of the ways that candidates at the regional and local levels could contest power. Henceforth running for office meant building a local power base and arriving at an understanding with a political patron at the next level above, rather than engaging in an electoral contest.

This new structure heralded the arrival of yet another generation at the helm of the revolutionary state: the *licenciados*, or college graduates, thus named to distinguish them from their predecessors, who had come out of the military, most of whom had no more than a middle school education. This new generation of leaders had no firsthand experience with the violent decade of the 1910s; indeed most of them had only heard their parents tell of it. The first of the licenciado presidents was Miguel Alemán Valdés, the son of a revolutionary leader and Obregón loyalist. In 1929 the elder Miguel Alemán had died fighting in the insurrection of José Gonzalo Escobar, who had taken up arms to fight the Calles-dominated government in the name of the slain caudillo. The younger Alemán had served as secretary of gobernación under Avila Camacho and had thus been responsible for internal security during World War II.

The Alemán administration marked a watershed moment in the entrenchment of the ruling party. It was under Alemán that the PRI state acquired its well-known characteristics: presidential absolutism, one-party monopoly on power, manipulation of mass organizations, the promotion of a nationalist unifying ideology in place of class and ideological differences, the elimination of the political Left from the official coalition, and state domination of the labor movement. Alemán's inauguration also signified the ascent of a conservative postrevolutionary oligarchy of financiers, businessmen, and industrialists. As one historian observed, "Alemán . . . profoundly changed the nation's course by allying the state with moneyed interests, wooing foreign capital, accelerating industrialization, and undoing or mitigating many of the reforms promulgated by Cárdenas."⁵ In addition, Alemán brought a highly corrupt clique to power, as the movie *La Ley de Herodes* graphically illustrates by way of a junkyard operator who extorts thousands of pesos from an impoverished village simply by brandishing his authority as the local *jefe municipal*. During his rule, government officials illegally transferred

funds from federal, state, and municipal accounts; politicians secured government contracts for themselves or members of their immediate family; and the famous *mordida*, or bribe—a standby in Mexico since precolonial times—became a common way of influencing decisions large and small. One prominent historian at the Colegio de México put it well when he stated, “The dishonesty of the revolutionary leaders, more than anything else . . . has split the very heart of the Mexican Revolution.”⁶

No organization reflected this shift toward institutionalization more than the Confederation of Mexican Workers (CTM). The new leader of the labor federation, Fidel Velázquez Sánchez, was a former milkman and Zapatista. Heading an affiliate union of Luis Morones’s Regional Mexican Workers’ Federation (CROM), Velázquez broke with the Federation in 1929 and joined Vicente Lombardo Toledano in establishing the Cardenista CTM in 1936. In 1941 he succeeded Lombardo as CTM’s leader, forced Communists and Lombardistas out of the union leadership, and moved the organization to the political center. Velázquez remained the CTM’s principal figure until 1997. During his tenure, *charismo* (boss rule) increasingly characterized the labor federation, as he repressed democratic tendencies inside the CTM and in independent unions throughout the country as a whole. Under Velázquez, the CTM became a reliable and often uncritical appendage of the official party and, by extension, the president. Like Alemán, Velázquez parroted the party line about pursuing “the Revolution’s” aims of national development and social justice; also like the president, the labor czar cared far more about the former than the latter.

Nonetheless the PRI was far from a monolithic party bound to the mere whim of the president. The three sectors within the PRI—labor, peasants, and “popular,” a catch phrase that combined middle-class party members as well as women, youth, street vendors, and many others—remained in constant competition, as did the state governors and mayors who lobbied for the attention of the central government. At least every six years, the jockeying among several *presidenciabiles* (plausible presidential aspirants) to receive the president’s *dedazo*, or nomination as the official party’s candidate, brought these groups into play. Although the president’s authority informally extended to wielding decisive influence in the selection of state governors and even *diputados* and *senadores* in the federal congress (a legislature that never once seriously challenged an executive initiative in the period covered in this chapter), the nation’s top priista often did so in ways that accommodated local power structures. Finally, Mexicans expressed their opinions through biting political humor that collectively influenced the policymaking process in ways that historians have only begun to understand.

Indeed lest one desire to promote a top-down, Mexico City–centered focus on the PRI’s ability to maintain power, one must analyze as well the “informal” local and regional power dynamics involved in the PRI’s “perfect dictatorship.” As recent scholarship has demonstrated, the presence of the PRI throughout Mexico has always been uneven. Even more important, the rule of the state has always been shaped in many ways at the regional and local level. As with the 1920s and 1930s, the post-1940 state did not simply impose itself upon the countryside; rather it contended with, and worked

through, the regional and municipal structures of power and the historical relations of control that it found throughout the nation. While we should pay attention to the *formal* corporatist structure of PRI rule, it should not completely dominate our understanding of how the PRI negotiated its power across Mexico. The state and its ruling party constantly needed to respond to various forms of resistance and accommodation at the grassroots level, in ways that are specific to local and regional populations and circumstances. Occurring outside of the formal political arena, these subnational contingencies represent significant historical, political, cultural, and economic factors, variables such as traditional indigenous authority in highland Chiapas and cults of the Virgin in devoutly Catholic Michoacán.

All of these local and regional variables became crucial sites of conflict and negotiation for the ongoing rule of the PRI. They not only served to complicate or hinder the party's national, centralist program, but they also shaped local people's daily lives and understandings of themselves and, in turn, of the state and their place within or outside it. Mirroring the early history of the PNR, when the ruling party was a conglomerate of regional parties and their bosses, local and regional cultural factors influenced and created political forms after 1946. The way the PRI responded and adapted to these forms determined the successful transition from a postrevolutionary government with few centralized institutional mechanisms to one with an array of corporatist and regional mechanisms of control. The PRI was born of, and existed with, powerful regional bosses and caciques who carefully measured their relations with the party, shrewdly using both accommodation and resistance to ensure their own control over local economic and political worlds. In Chiapas and Michoacán, in Yucatán and Chihuahua—indeed across the breadth of the country—local history, identity, and politics informed the ways the PRI and the people negotiated rule beyond the bounds of Mexico City. In the process, grassroots dynamics and social movements challenged the form and function of centralized rule and helped shape the ways the PRI modified its policies and positions.

Thus, rather than a large Leviathan spreading its fearsome girth across the Mexican landscape, the PRI has been shaped and structured by the very subjects it attempts to dominate and discipline. The PRI is a more subtle creature that has based its longevity on *infiltrating* local realities, co-opting whenever possible—offering local power brokers positions within the PRI hierarchy—and modifying its methods of rule according to the cultural requirements of local populations. Occasionally the PRI has imposed its will rather clumsily, as in the case of the Tlatelolco massacre. But more often than not, there was a dialectic at work in which the center and the regions and localities shaped one another, in constant motion. The result was a *modus vivendi* that should dispel any reflexive notion of a brutish Leviathan unwilling to negotiate its rule. The “perfect dictatorship” was what one Mexican historian has dubbed a *dictablanda*, or soft authoritarian state very much aware of its weakness, rather than a *dictadura* that unflinchingly imposed its decisions.⁷ Another historian has pointed out, “Precisely because the postrevolutionary process of state formation in Mexico engaged local communities so intensely, the very construction of state principles and ideals depended upon how they were under-

stood, reshaped, and discarded at the local level.”⁸

THE REVOLUTION IS CAPITALIST AND ANTI-COMMUNIST

We can find one example of such a dialectic in the state’s projection of Mexican nationalism in the Cold War era and the ways this projection reflected on a revolution that appeared to fade in the rearview mirror. The creation of the PRI coincided with the coming of the Cold War, a global (and Latin American) confrontation that circumscribed and redefined both the official and the popular discourse about the revolution. During World War II, fascism had been the enemy, and Mexican Communists enjoyed a modicum of toleration. The victory over the Axis Powers, however, had left the Western European Allies exhausted, leaving the United States and the Soviet Union as the world’s preeminent powers. The two rookie superpowers soon squabbled over control of Europe and East Asia. Soviet-supported governments imposed Communist rule in the Eastern European countries occupied by the Red Army at the end of World War II. In 1949 the triumph of Mao Zedong’s Communist movement in China—a triumph achieved with only limited Soviet assistance—demonstrated the ongoing appeal of radical ideas of social transformation. Alarmed at what appeared to be a victorious march of Communist governments, the U.S. government formulated the Doctrine of Containment, which called upon the “free world” (that is, capitalist nations) to fight the worldwide spread of Communism. As part of its campaign to ensure cordial relations with the United States, the Alemán government eagerly seized upon containment discourse to portray itself and the revolution that it claimed to represent as part of the free world. Anti-Communism became official policy, as Alemán proclaimed Communism incompatible with *mexicanidad*. In tandem with this anti-Communist rhetoric, U.S. representations of the Mexican Revolution came to stress its positive nature, as well as its alleged fundamental affinity with North American values. North Americans perceived that their differences with the mildly social democratic PRI were small compared to fundamental conflicts with the Communist Soviet Union and China.

A good example of this emerging view of the Mexican Revolution as an anti-Communist and capitalist movement is the renowned Hollywood film *Viva Zapata!*, released in 1952 with Marlon Brando in the lead role. The director Elia Kazan and the screenwriter John Steinbeck were liberal Cold Warriors who cast Zapata as a defender of the time-honored values of life and liberty. Brando’s Zapata was a handsome, charismatic, and honest campesino leader fighting not only for land but also for the right to local self-determination. Although it recognized the struggle for land as the central pillar of Zapatismo, the film emphasized the hero’s tragic fight against scheming military dictators and their civilian stooges. *Viva Zapata!* thus played to a U.S. audience that wanted to see the popular hero as a Mexican Tom Paine fighting for liberty. As depicted in the film, Zapata defined his movement with limited input from below, and the audience caught few glimpses of the grinding poverty that had prompted campesinos to take up arms against the repressive Díaz regime. Indeed the land issue was

cast as a struggle between valiant peasants and greedy landowners over property stolen by the latter, not as a conflict in which the notion of unqualified landownership was very much at stake.

The official cult of Obregón offers another illuminating window onto this changing discourse. Since 1943 the Obregón monument has displayed the caudillo's famous arm, lost in battle against the Villistas and preserved by Obregón's private physician in formaldehyde. This public display made the monument into a tourist attraction as the only place in the country where a body part of a political leader was on view. In the words of one cultural commentator, the arm "infused charisma into a bureaucracy that insistently called itself revolutionary."⁹ The sacralization of the limb was part of a larger aim: Obregón's apotheosis as a revolutionary hero to assist the PRI's claim to a revolutionary heritage that the party had in fact abandoned. In 1950 Luis L. León, a stalwart of the ruling party since its founding and a close personal friend of both Obregón and Calles, announced, "The Revolution is a sacred movement. . . . To defame the great revolutionaries is to insult and betray the Revolution." He called upon revolutionaries "of all the 'isms' to express solidarity with [this] great movement and always know how to defend it," and he asked his audience to defend "not only Obregón, but also the triumphs, the greatness, and the accomplishment of all the dead leaders of the Revolution."¹⁰ Not surprisingly, not everyone was happy with this interpretation. For example, one of the caudillo's sons, Humberto Obregón, opposed León's appropriation of his father's symbolism. In a letter he portrayed his father as "a caudillo of a revolution of extreme leftist tendencies." Demonstrating the continuing battle over the legacy of the revolution, he labeled the PRI a "group of plutocrats" that resembled the inner circle of the Old Regime of Porfirio Díaz.¹¹

At the same time, the PRI realized the need to celebrate the other dead heroes of the revolution as well. It found that opportunity in the Monumento a la Revolución. Unlike the Obregón monument, the regime had thus far not utilized the structure for official celebrations, in all likelihood because popular memory associated it too closely with Calles's Maximato. As if to show that Alemán had no such compunctions, he organized an annual November 20 commemoration. Over time that monument, like the one to Obregón, became the repository of revolutionary relics. In 1942 Congress ordered the transfer of Carranza's ashes to the monument, and over the next decades the remains of Madero (1960), Calles (1969), Cárdenas (1970), and Villa (1976) joined those of Carranza. Thus, beginning in the late 1940s, the Monumento a la Revolución eclipsed the Obregón monument as the primary locus of the memory of "the Revolution," moving the emphasis of the commemorations toward a more inclusive celebration of the recent past.

Ordinary Mexicans, on the other hand, embraced popular culture to create their own rituals that reflected the legacy of the revolution. In particular the advent and rapid spread of television communicated cultural symbols relating to what it meant to be Mexican in ways that no other medium had been able to do. Mexican cinema was also experiencing a golden age, in which the national industry created unforgettable stars. For example, in 1957 the funeral of the popular singer and actor Pedro

Infante, following a tragic plane crash, attracted 150,000 people, far more than those of the major revolutionary heroes combined. Another popular actor who represented mexicanidad was José María Moreno, better known as Cantinflas. In his many roles, Cantinflas represented the *naco* or *pelado*, the “uncultured” and impoverished urban lumpen despised by the upper classes for his rough manners and poor taste. As one historian put it, Cantinflas “symbolized the underdog who triumphed through trickery over more powerful opponents.”¹² Finally, there was the famous wrestler El Santo, the masked, premier practitioner of the uniquely Mexican sport of *lucha libre*. Also known as the “Silver-Masked Man,” El Santo made his debut performance in 1942 by defeating seven opponents in an eight-man battle royal, a form of wrestling in which multiple opponents fight each other in the same contest until only one of them is left standing. His wrestling career lasted almost five decades, and he remains one of the sport’s greatest heroes. El Santo appeared in movies and comic books and came to represent the ordinary Mexican’s everyday struggle for justice.

The disconnect between PRI propaganda and the desires and expectations of ordinary people was not lost on Alemán and the PRI, especially as the nation underwent a serious economic crisis after the Allied victory in World War II. Between 1946 and 1950 Mexico experienced low rates of growth occasioned by a drop in postwar commodity prices, high inflation due to a steep decline in the value of the peso, and high unemployment caused in part by the return of tens of thousands of Mexican *braceros* who were no longer needed in the U.S. economy. As real wages dropped precipitously, Alemán waited in vain for the kind of U.S. economic assistance that was rebuilding Western Europe and Japan. Even though Mexico and several other Latin American nations had made material contributions to the war, the U.S. government did not reward them for their loyalty, believing the western hemisphere to be relatively safe from Communist infiltration. Soon Mexicans from all walks of life grew restless about the deteriorating conditions in their country. In 1951 five thousand miners from the northern town of Nueva Rosita, accompanied by ten thousand family members, marched all the way to Mexico City in a “caravan of hunger” designed to demonstrate their plight to President Alemán. Their immediate grievance was the PRI’s takeover of the miners’ union, but a stunning decline in real wages served as the backdrop for this desperate action; it took the miners fifty days and nights to reach the nation’s capital. It was a testament to the PRI’s grip on news coverage that the media hardly covered this arduous trek.

Another protest movement had coalesced around the aging Zapatista Rubén Jaramillo. Born in 1900, Jaramillo had joined Zapata’s army at the tender age of fourteen and continued the fight after his leader’s murder in 1919. Encouraged by the Cardenista land reform but believing that Zapata’s legacy remained incomplete until all land was in the hands of campesinos, he organized a cane cutters’ union that rose up in arms in 1943. Two years later, following an amnesty from the state, Jaramillo founded an agrarian party in Morelos that was soon repressed by the local branch of the PRI. In the course of his struggles within and outside the system, Jaramillo inspired a new generation

to continue to fight for Zapata's ideals of "land and liberty," thereby validating the continued vitality of revolutionary icons and ideas at the popular level. For the Jaramillistas, Zapata's legacy was more palpable and politically nourishing than Obregón's, and they pushed for a continued commitment to land reform rather than vacuous homage to dead leaders at the Obregón monument, the Monumento a la Revolución, and Zapata's gravesite. In Morelos and elsewhere, popular revolutionary legacies held greater relevance than state-sponsored propaganda designed to cloak a less than revolutionary reality.

Alemán felt the need for a strong economic stimulus to address simultaneously the economic downturn and the criticism of his administration. He committed his government to state-sponsored economic development to guide the nation out of its postwar doldrums. The president was familiar with the argument of the Argentine economist Raúl Prebisch that Latin America's structural dependence on U.S. and European manufactured products lay at the heart of its economic malaise. Prebisch counseled Latin American leaders to act assertively to prevent further erosion of the region's terms of trade, and specifically to provide government funding for import-substitution industrialization, even at the cost of running a high budget deficit. Alemán's government spent millions of pesos to build up industry, a sector that had already grown considerably during the 1920s and 1930s. It imposed punitive tariffs on more efficiently produced foreign imports that competed with Mexican products. The government also invested in the nation's infrastructure to attract tourism to resorts such as Acapulco, as well as to picturesque colonial cities and towns in the states of Guanajuato, Michoacán, Morelos, and Puebla. These moves came at a fortuitous time, as the Korean War (1950–53) motivated a remobilization of the U.S. military complex, which once again accelerated U.S. demand for Mexican raw materials.

As a result, Mexico experienced high economic growth during an era many observers dubbed the "Mexican Miracle." Measured at the macroeconomic level, the Mexican Miracle appeared to yield impressive results. Annual growth rates averaged 6.4 percent between 1940 and 1970, and per capita gross domestic product doubled between 1950 and 1973, adjusted for inflation. These boom years witnessed stunning productivity increases in both industry and agriculture. Dozens of multinational corporations built partial assembly plants in Mexico, and a "green revolution" occurred as new planting and irrigation techniques expanded both arable acreage and yields nationwide. The emergence of Acapulco as a world-class resort heralded the golden age of Mexican tourism, when millions of North Americans and Europeans annually visited the country's beaches and cultural attractions. By 1968 workers had finally recovered, in real terms, the purchasing power they had enjoyed at the end of the Cárdenas years. Economic growth in the United States attracted a new wave of immigrant labor, and Mexicans in the United States sent back sizable remittances to their families.

Significant advances in education and health care accompanied economic growth. Illiteracy fell from about 70 percent in 1940 to approximately 20 percent in 1960. Following advances made under

the Sonorans and Cárdenas, improved sanitation contributed to the eradication of yellow fever and the most virulent forms of amoebic dysentery. With the help of widespread vaccination and anti-mosquito campaigns, the government also made significant progress against malaria and other infectious diseases. As a result, the annual death rate declined from twenty-three per thousand in 1940 to ten per thousand in 1970. Infant mortality dropped dramatically.

Of course, there was a downside to such progress. The Mexican Miracle accentuated rather than attenuated social inequality. At 0.56, Mexico's Gini coefficient during the 1950s and 1960s (a measure of the degree of social inequality) was the second highest in Latin America, behind only Brazil's. Mexican families remained large, and few Mexicans used contraception due to its cost and prevailing opposition from the Catholic Church. The fertility rate remained stable even as infant mortality declined, and the population grew at increasing annual rates: 2.7 percent in the 1940s, 3.1 percent in the 1950s, and 3.4 percent in the 1960s. Thus the population increased by 150 percent between 1940 and 1970, when almost fifty million lived in Mexico, half of whom were under the age of twenty. No economic model could accommodate such explosive population growth.

In addition, the so-called Miracle belied the uneven nature of development. Economic growth primarily benefited manufacturing, export agriculture, tourism, and the border region. In the heavily indigenous rural South, however, subsistence agriculture continued to struggle as the population exploded and the government kept the ejidos undercapitalized and undersupplied. In addition, industrialization attracted millions of rural migrants to the cities, and not all of them could find work for decent pay. By the 1960s a ring of *ciudades perdidas* ("lost cities," or shantytowns) surrounded the nation's major urban centers. Runaway urbanization of this kind induced the government to pay even less attention to the languishing countryside. In addition, high inflation initially accompanied industrialization, and in 1954 alone the peso lost half of its value against the U.S. dollar. In response, the government intervened to stabilize wages, prices, and currency exchange rates, a strategy known as *desarrollo estabilizador*, or stabilizing development. While this strategy limited inflation for the next twenty years, it also circumscribed salary and wage increases for both workers and professionals. State-assisted development also imposed a heavy burden on the federal treasury and created a new kind of dependence on capital goods such as industrial machinery. As early as 1958 Franz Böker, a German merchant and longtime resident of Mexico City since Porfirian days, wrote, "As a European who does not believe in miracles, I can only express my greatest concern about the future. . . . The expensive machinery and technological innovations [necessary for industrialization] threaten Mexico's foreign currency holdings no less than the previous imports of manufactured goods."¹³

The overriding emphasis on modernity and economic progress further moved the PRI away from its revolutionary roots. The growth of a new bourgeoisie under the aegis of what Böker called "firmly entrenched ex-revolutionaries" contributed, in the judgment of one historian, to the maturing of a commercially constructed mexicanidad, an "attempt on the part of the state to create a mass media—

based cultural nationalism.”¹⁴ As long as the macroeconomic figures looked impressive to the government, and as long as both campesino and labor groups remained loyal, the official party felt little incentive to change. Thus until the 1960s the PRI did little more than tinker with Alemán’s system; in 1953, for example, Congress finally implemented women’s suffrage, decades after the measure had first been debated. Otherwise the developmentalist wing of the PRI remained firmly in charge. In the 1952 presidential elections, Alemán’s handpicked successor, Adolfo Ruiz Cortines, easily thwarted a challenge from General Miguel Henríquez Guzmán, whose supporters included many former Zapatistas and other agrarians and workers dissatisfied with the pro-business orientation of the Alemanistas.

REVOLUTIONS “GOOD” AND “BAD”

Significantly the PRI showed the ability to engage in self-correction when popular pressure and political circumstances so dictated. In 1958, as women prepared to vote in their first presidential elections, the PRI leadership was well aware of the fact that its prior three presidential administrations had successively steered the party and the country to the Right. Presidents Avila Camacho, Alemán, and Ruiz Cortines (1952–58) had presided over governments that privileged economic development over social justice. At a time when Brazil and other Latin American nations experimented with left-wing populism, the PRI sought to correct its course. Encouraged by former president Cárdenas, Ruiz Cortines nominated as his successor the secretary of labor, Adolfo López Mateos, a leader with progressive credentials who had distinguished himself by successfully mediating a series of labor conflicts.

Immediately after his inauguration, the railroad workers, a radical segment within the Mexican working class since the beginning of the revolution, decided to test López Mateos’s political persuasion. Their strike targeted a government-owned sector rather than greedy foreign investors. President López Mateos wasted no time demonstrating that he would not tolerate labor unrest in state-owned businesses. He forcibly broke up the strike and arrested the leader of the railroad workers, Demetrio Vallejo, on charges that he promoted “social dissolution.” The president also ordered the jailing of the Marxist muralist David Alfaro Siqueiros, who had declared his solidarity with the strikers.

However, López Mateos subsequently moved several degrees to the left. He signaled his intention to address one of the workers’ major grievances, invoking a constitutional article that mandated profit sharing. In a speech in Guaymas, Sonora, on July 1, 1959, the Mexican president declared that he stood at “the extreme left within the limits set by the Constitution.”¹⁵ A few months later he nationalized the country’s electrical industry; and beginning in 1962 the government required most Mexican businesses to distribute a portion of their profits among their employees. López Mateos also offered the agrarian rebel Rubén Jaramillo full protection in exchange for laying down his arms (again), and he appointed him a special delegate of the Confederación Nacional Campesina (CNC) in Morelos. And much as Cárdenas had forged his brand of populism by visiting every corner of the republic, López

Mateos visited sixteen different nations in the Americas, Asia, and Europe in an effort to become a major player in the “nonaligned” movement, which sought to assert a middle ground between the U.S.-led North American Treaty Organization and the Soviet-led Warsaw Pact. The Mexican president also received visits from such dignitaries as India’s Jawaharlal Nehru and Yugoslavia’s Josip Broz Tito. His extensive travels earned him the moniker “López Paseos” (a loose translation would be “the Peripatetic López”). This joke aside, Mexicans from all walks of life held López Mateos in high regard. Whereas Cárdenas would have alarmed foreign and domestic investors alike if he had declared himself on the “extreme left” within the Constitution, conservative entrepreneurs and journalists reacted to López Mateos’s speech in Guaymas with indifference, knowing full well that the PRI machine would keep the nation on its sure path of state-sponsored capitalist development.

The Cuban Revolution provided an external stimulus to this more progressive and nationalist posture, and hence another example of the dialectic that shaped the PRI amid pressures from without and from below. On New Year’s Day 1959, Fidel Castro’s bearded rebels rode triumphantly into Havana, ending a three-year guerrilla campaign against the U.S.-backed dictator Fulgencio Batista. This guerrilla campaign had originated on Mexican soil, as Castro and his group (which included the young Argentine revolutionary Che Guevara) had trained in Veracruz and departed for Cuba from the port city. As the first social revolution in Latin America since the Mexican Revolution to triumph by the force of arms, the Cuban Revolution invited comparisons with the Mexican case. From the outset, that comparison showed the Cuban Revolution to be far more ideologically focused and their leaders to be far more radical in their methods. After his victory, Castro referred to the Mexican Revolution as a guide during the struggle against the Batista regime. What he failed to mention was that the Mexican experience had helped convince him to conduct his revolution rather differently. He desired to avoid the fate of Madero, Carranza, and Obregón, all murdered by their opponents, by quickly and decisively consolidating his power.

Soon, the “romantic image of Castro’s Revolution began to catch the public imagination” in Mexico.¹⁶ In February 1959 twelve rebels from Castro’s days in the Sierra Maestra visited Mexico, and the group found an enthusiastic reception. As the year unfolded, Cuba’s early revolutionary program struck a chord with many Mexicans as well. As the Mexican ambassador in Havana, Gilberto Bosques, pointed out, Castro’s policies, which included agrarian reform and the nationalization of foreign property, resembled Cardenista initiatives. Bosques even went so far as to lament the lack of an international propaganda office for the Cuban Revolution. “This revolution,” he noted, “deserves good spokespeople.”¹⁷ Of course, he would not have to wait long, as the Cuban Revolution produced one of the most enduring icons of the twentieth century in Che Guevara. Guevara became a symbol for social revolution in Latin America, immortalized by the famous *guerrillero heróico* image created by the Cuban photographer Alberto Korda in 1960. Even today Korda’s image endures on T-shirts and bumper stickers, commodified and often divorced from its political message. In Mexico Guevara

continues to serve as a reminder of a more radical revolution than the Mexican one—devoted, at least in theory, to the redemption of the poor. At a time when many veterans of the Mexican Revolution remained active in public life, the events in Cuba resuscitated debates about the nature of Mexico's own revolutionary upheaval.

A good example was the emergence of former president Cárdenas as the principal Mexican advocate for the Cuban Revolution. Since his departure from the presidency, Cárdenas had remained involved in politics as the unofficial leader of the left wing within the official party. A revered figure within Mexico and much of Latin America, the ex-president had paid close attention to progressive movements in other Latin American nations, particularly the democratic governments of Juan José Arévalo and Jacobo Arbenz in Guatemala (1944–54). Known as the “Ten Years of Spring,” these two administrations had sought to weaken the power of the giant banana companies and return land to Guatemala's impoverished indigenous campesinos. Cárdenas had praised Arévalo as an “example for oppressed peoples.”¹⁸ In 1949, as U.S. foreign policy increasingly targeted social reformist governments like Guatemala's as enemies of the free world, Cárdenas had pledged his support to Arévalo against “the armed aggression of the great interests opposed to progress.”¹⁹ Five years later, when the U.S. government labeled the Arbenz administration a Communist threat, Cárdenas came to its defense, professing his “personal friendship and sympathy” with Guatemala's experiment in social reform.²⁰ When a CIA-assisted coup overthrew Arbenz in June 1954 and ushered in a repressive military regime that would remain in power for almost forty years—an event witnessed by Guevara, among others—Cárdenas's principled position appeared prescient. Five years later, when another Latin American revolution promised a better life to the poor, many Mexicans looked to the ex-president for support. On July 26, 1959, the anniversary of Castro's attack on the Moncada barracks, Cárdenas traveled to Havana to show his personal support for Castro's triumph. In an effort to draw parallels between the Mexican and Cuban experiences, he declared, “The agrarian reform in Mexico received [its] most virulent attacks from the enemies of an anti-feudal struggle. . . . We Mexicans know well that revolutions are not exported and imported. We respect the integrity of emancipation movements in other countries, as we have asked for respect for the Mexican Revolution.”²¹

Prodded by Cárdenas, López Mateos recognized the symbolic power of the Cuban Revolution. He knew that Castro's triumph could remind Mexicans that the momentum of their own revolution had long expired. Siqueiros, for one, noted in a newspaper interview that Castro's movement had left the Mexican Revolution far behind. Therefore the president defended Castro both against the United States and against conservatives within his own country, who sponsored anti-Communist demonstrations. In June 1960, on the occasion of the visit of President Osvaldo Dorticós of Cuba, López Mateos declared, “We, who have gone through similar historical stages, understand and value the Cuban effort at change. . . . We trust that the Cuban Revolution will be—just as ours has been—one more step toward the greatness of America.”²²

This verbal support of the Cuban Revolution, however, soon became more difficult to sustain. Even during Dorticós's visit, the conservative newspaper *Excélsior* had dissented from López Mateos, stating that the Cuban government was a satellite of Moscow. Afterward many Mexicans, particularly the Alemán faction, liked even less what they heard about Cuba. As tensions grew between Castro and the United States, the new Cuban government ordered the execution of hundreds of prominent Batista supporters, landlords, and leaders of the army and it increasingly turned toward socialism. In April 1961 a CIA-sponsored invasion near the Bay of Pigs sought to put an end to the Cuban Revolution. After quashing this invasion, Castro and Guevara moved their revolution even further to the Left, expropriating almost all private property and forging an alliance with the Soviet Union.

The Bay of Pigs invasion demonstrated the ambivalence of the López Mateos administration toward revolution in the present rather than the past tense. The president faced the problem of placating two opposing groups. On the one hand, the leftists and nationalists around Cárdenas demanded that López Mateos support and defend Castro, whom they considered the new standard-bearer for social revolution. The former president led a demonstration against U.S. intervention on the Zócalo in Mexico City and even announced that he might go to Cuba at the head of thousands of volunteers, organized into "Pancho Villa Brigades," to help Castro fight U.S. invaders, should that become necessary. Cárdenas's actions—unprecedented because they amounted to a critique of the current government—created an image problem for the government. The left wing within the PRI argued that Castro, and not López Mateos, represented revolutionary change. And on April 18, 1961, just days after the invasion, angry protesters sacked the Instituto Cultural México-Norteamericano in Morelia, Michoacán, an institution that was a visible symbol of U.S.-Mexican cooperation. This leftist response might be summed up by the cries of "Cuba sí, Yanquis no!" that emanated from large-scale demonstrations in the capital and several other Mexican cities.²³ On the other hand, former presidents Alemán and Rodríguez led a conservative faction within the PRI that urged the Mexican government to condemn the Castro regime. This faction considered Communism anathema and "un-Mexican." Also on the Right, pro-clerical elements shouted, "Cristianismo sí, comunismo no!" Only in their rejection of U.S. military intervention in Latin America did these ideologically opposed groups find common ground.

Seeking to maintain a balancing act between the two camps, López Mateos launched an abstract defense of Cuba's right to national self-determination. Without commenting on the merits of either the Castro regime or its opponents, his ambassador to the Organization of American States (OAS) made an impassioned plea to his colleagues to prevent further assistance to rebels trying to overthrow a sovereign government. López Mateos's support of time-honored diplomatic principles cloaked the fact that he avoided Cuban officials after the Bay of Pigs invasion. The Mexican president also stopped emphasizing the similarities between the historical experiences of Mexico and Cuba. From the standpoint of the Mexican elite, Castro was a Marxist dictator who embraced an economic doctrine alien to Latin America instead of pursuing the rightful path of fighting for land and liberty represented by the

idealized “Revolution” represented by the PRI. That “Revolution,” the origins of which now lay half a century in the past, remained an anti-Communist revolution firmly allied with the capitalist West—a “good” revolution counterposed to the “bad” Cuban example. In this context, rebels such as Jaramillo were no longer as useful as they had been only a few years before. On May 26, 1962, the judicial police and the army arrested Jaramillo, together with his wife and three children, and assassinated them.

However, since the polarity between a good and a bad revolution was useful to the Mexican government, it continued to defend Cuban sovereignty even as it cracked down on rebels and protesters at home. Thus López Mateos’s representative voted against a motion in the OAS to expel Cuba in early 1962. At the end of that year, unlike most other Latin American nations, Mexico did not break diplomatic relations with the Castro government after the stationing of Soviet missiles on Cuban soil led to the infamous Cuban Missile Crisis in October 1962. In 1964 López Mateos refused to heed an OAS resolution that mandated the suspension of air service and other commercial travel to Cuba. Thus Mexico City became the only possible layover point in the western hemisphere for travel between Havana and any other city in the Americas.

One reason the Mexican government increasingly distanced itself from the Cuban Revolution was the increasing political polarization within Mexico itself. In August 1961 Cárdenas helped found the left-wing Movimiento de Liberación Nacional (National Liberation Movement, or MLN), a group committed to national control over resources, social justice, and peace. In response, right-wing elements coalesced under the Frente Cívico Mexicano de Afirmación Revolucionaria (Mexican Civic Front of Revolutionary Affirmation), a faction organized with the help of former presidents Alemán and Rodríguez and several notable ex-Callistas. In December 1961, concerned about a possible split in the official party, López Mateos invited all seven living former presidents to join his cabinet. Fortunately for him, all of them accepted his invitation and restored a semblance of unity to the national government. Cárdenas thus turned his back on the MLN and showed that loyalty to the party ultimately trumped all other considerations. Throughout the remainder of his life, he remained circumspect about supporting other radical protest movements with agrarian or pro-labor aims, such as the rural insurgency led by the teachers Arturo Gámiz and Pablo Gómez in Chihuahua.

These mounting tensions between the grassroots and an increasingly authoritarian state that labeled itself revolutionary ultimately culminated in the student movement of 1968. This movement mirrored other radical student-led protests around the world, particularly in France, Germany, and the United States. With its epicenter in the nation’s capital, and principally among scions of the middle class, it was by far the most prominent and visible protest movement against the PRI, and one in which women shared center stage. The students took advantage of the spotlight cast on their city by the 1968 Summer Olympics, the first such event to be held in the developing world. Their demands were primarily of a political nature: release of all political prisoners, implementation of a democratic structure of governance at the national university, dismissal of a police chief known for his brutality,

and dissolution of the paramilitary riot police known as *granaderos*. If students believed they would be able to express their grievances as freely as their counterparts in the United States and Europe, however, their government soon dashed these hopes. On August 27 approximately half a million protesters gathered in the Zócalo, only to be dispersed when tanks moved into the area after nightfall. In mid-September the army occupied the campus of the national university and made hundreds of arrests ([figure 7.2](#)).

The bloody massacre of October 2, 1968, was therefore both the climax of a long confrontation and the beginning of a new era. The conflict had deep roots in the public's disaffection with the PRI, a ruling party that appeared to have forgotten its revolutionary origins. The massacre had wide-ranging effects besides destroying the time-worn myths of the PRI. It confronted protesters with the choice between giving up the struggle for reform and continuing the struggle underground, thereby sowing the seeds of the armed rebellions of the 1970s. The carnage also recalled Cananea and Río Blanco, the most notable Porfirian-era protests broken up by state-sponsored violence. Many Mexicans—including noted historians—believed that their country had come full circle in the past sixty to seventy years.



FIGURE 7.2 Police hold students at gunpoint inside an apartment building in Tlatelolco, Mexico City, after the massacre of October 2, 1968. Associated Press.

On October 19, 1971, two somber men took the stage during a ceremony at the Monumento a la Revolución. With President Luis Echeverría Álvarez in attendance, a man who had played a significant role in the Tlatelolco massacre as the secretary of gobernación, Plutarco Elías Calles Chacón and Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas read prepared speeches to reflect on an ironic twist of history. One year before, Lázaro Cárdenas had passed away, precisely twenty-five years after Plutarco Elías Calles's death on October 19, 1945. Now the monument housed the remains of the two men who had contributed more than any other to the creation of the architecture of the postrevolutionary Mexican state. On the occasion of this joint anniversary, their sons read eulogies that reflected not only on historic coincidence but also on their fathers as the twin pillars of the ruling party. It was time, Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas declared, for the "authentic revolutionaries to close ranks." Aco Elías Calles concurred: "Men are ephemeral . . . and what persists . . . is the ideals of our Revolution, aspiring toward a better humanity, always to be perfected. These ideals need to unify us rather than divide us."²⁴

These statements revealed not only the PRI's official version of history—one that emphasized the existence of a revolutionary family capable of working out its many squabbles—but also the crisis of the party's brand after Tlatelolco. In particular, Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas's comments expressed the need for unity because the massacre had shattered the party's cherished myths. Not surprisingly the massacre defined the era that followed, one in which the embers of revolution would continue to burn even while "the Revolution" sponsored by the official party had lost all momentum.