The Revolution Is Dead

In 1960, one of Mexico's most respected historians, Daniel Cosio Villegas, pronounced the revolution dead and in need of a decent burial. While it had vigorously attacked the past, the revolution offered little guidance for the future. That weakness, according to Professor Cosio Villegas, explained its demise. Revolutions do not continue indefinitely. They, too, end.

I sincerely believe that the Mexican people have long known that the Mexican Revolution is dead, although they do not know, or only half understand, why this fact is concealed instead of being proclaimed. Therefore, the question arose some time ago: If it is dead, why have the death notices not been circulated? Why, more exactly, has the Mexican Revolution not been buried in the Rotunda of the Great, or perhaps in the Monument to the Mexican Revolution, where two of its heroes, Francisco Madero and Venustiano Carranza, already lie?

This lack of good manners in a people who boast of being paragons of courtesy —"as polite as a Mexican Indian," said Vicente Espinel in 1618—may be easily explained and even justified. Making public the death of someone arouses everyone's curiosity as to the inheritance left by the dead person, and excites his relatives—legitimate or spurious—to mistrust and resentment, if not to a battle to the death, a manner of speaking appropriate to a discussion of a dead person and of a death. The Mexican Revolution actually gave to the country, and especially to its leaders, an ideology and a language, and, so long as no new ideas and expressions appear, it is easier—and perhaps it has been indispensable—to continue governing with the old ideology and language. A popular saying is that it is better to endure a known evil than to risk an unknown good; so here it may perhaps be said that it is better to endure a known dead person than to risk an unknown live one.

Two attitudes very common among today's old-time Mexicans could have led to the suspicion that there was some truth in the rumors that the Revolution was dead. One of these is a tendency to proclaim to high heaven the virtues of the Mexican Revolution and to bury as deep as possible its faults. The other is to assert that it burst out of nothing, thus magnifying the breadth of its accomplishments and the brilliance of its eminence. Apart from the fact that it is very normal, very healthy, and very human to find consolation in recalling lost felicity, it may be truly maintained that the Mexican Revolution was a social, economic, and political movement of extraordinary magnitude and depth, in addition to having a good deal more originality than the Mexicans themselves grant it. And it is also largely true that its origins were very modest, so much so that hardly any ideologists were responsible for its conception.

In order to estimate the magnitude and originality of the Mexican Revolution it will suffice to recall, on the one hand, the scope of its destructive force, and, on the other hand, comparable movements in other places.

In effect, it totally swept away not only the political regime of Porfirio Díaz but all of Porfriian society, that is, the social classes or groups together with their ideas, tastes and manners. Not only the commanders-in-chief of the army but their officers and all the soldiers disappeared without exception. Landholders, urban and especially agricultural, were almost entirely replaced by new ones. Not one of the great newspapers survived. Only two out of about fifty banks continued into the new regime. Official bureaucracy—federal, state and municipal—was wholly reformed. Moreover, let us remember that in no other Latin American country has an event of such magnitude occurred in the last hundred years, except now in Cuba. Strictly speaking, I believe that the only three changes to surpass it in extent and depth are the communist revolutions of Russia and China, and perhaps in Cuba. But even as regards these three, it may be stated that the Mexican Revolution was the first political regime to achieve power and deny the
validity of liberal political philosophy in order to give to the State the role of principal promoter of the nation's material and moral well-being. Speaking broadly and somewhat ironically, liberalism supposes that if you allow rich people to become richer, and richer people the richest, the poorest people may in time become simply poor—just as when it rains heavily at the top of a mountain, the valley far below will eventually receive some additional humidity. The Mexican Revolutionists believed in the early stages that rich people should not be allowed to become richer, and that all the power and resources of the State should be applied to the benefit of the poor.

Its humble origins may be expressed in a word. The Mexican Revolution, in reality, lacked great ideologists to shape it intellectually. The contribution of the so-called forerunners—especially, Flores Magón and his associates—and even of later figures such as Luis Cabrera, was of far greater moral than ideological value.

As a matter of fact, the Mexican Revolutionists first tried to define their goals formally when the 1917 Constitution was drawn up. The history of this episode is all the more interesting in that the Carranza government offered the Constitutional Congress of Querétaro, as an aid in preparing its work, Francisco Marco's *History of the Constitutional Congress of 1857* in a new edition which omitted Ponciano Arriaga's views on the bad distribution and worse use of land in Mexico. These two facts suggest that at least the Carranza group, then the roost powerful, hoped that the new Constitution would simply be a revision of the old one, a revision that would be justified by the experience of the country during the sixty years the 1857 Constitution had been in force.

Nonetheless, two events took place in the Querétaro Congress which Carranza and his group apparently did not foresee. The Revolution's lack of ideologists confirmed by the fact that the greatest technical-juridical influence on the writing of the new constitutional text turned out to be the book *The Constitution and the Dictatorship*. Its author, Emilio Rabasa, was beyond doubt a great jurist, a good writer and a persuasive and intelligent person. But he was also a bitter critic of the 1857 Constitution, a liberal who was committed to the reactionary regime of Porfirio Díaz, and he certainly lacked any revolutionary ideas or inclinations.

The predominant influence of Rabasa resulted in the enlarging of the powers of the executive branch at the expense of the many powers which the previous Constitution had given to the legislative branch. In this way, Mexico passed into a presidentialist regime, but not precisely because the revolutionaries believed that their idea of the State as principal promoter of public well-being required a strong and alert executive endowed with the legal authority to take prompt and direct action. The form of the new regime was actually suggested by a reactionary who wished to give posthumous justification to the dictatorial government of Porfirio Díaz. The other result of Rabasa's influence was perhaps beneficial. The critical tone of his book made the 1917 constituents see less merit in the work of their colleagues of 1857, so they felt fewer scruples at drawing away from it.

. . . . The constitutional text drawn up by those men of Querétaro was to serve as a pattern for the immediate future life of the country, and the pattern could channel, but also limit or shackle, any new, revitalizing—in short, revolutionary—force. A small group of constituents was determined to insert something new into the Constitution. Against an apparently general wave of feeling, it finally achieved the approval of Articles 3, 27, 123 and 130.

The essential meaning of Article 27 is that the economic interests of the State or of the Nation are above the interests of individuals or of groups, and therefore must prevail in case of opposition or conflict. This principle is obviously anti-liberal, very modern and nevertheless also very old. It was, after all, the order in New Spain during its three hundred years as a colony. But this article gave a formal legal base to agrarian reform and, in general, to the relations of the State with the exploiters of the Nation's natural
resources, particularly minerals and oil. The fact that the majority of these exploiters were foreign reveals the nationalistic and anti-foreign tone of the Mexican Revolution. But, this is confirmed and broadened by other provisions of the same article such as that which states that only Mexicans and Mexican corporations may acquire possession of lands, water or mining and oil resources, and that if foreigners want to obtain them, they must agree to consider themselves as Mexicans and not invoke the protection of their governments under penalty of losing their acquired wealth to the Nation. This same Article 27—but also Article 3 and even more Article 130—is anti-clerical and very much in keeping with an old Mexican tradition; and it is so to a degree of insistence and detail which is truly surprising.

Article 123 is, in reality, a complete law. Rather than being new in itself, it raised labor legislation to the rank of a constitutional law, while even today it is an ordinary law in most countries. . . . The constitutional character of this Mexican labor legislation unquestionably makes Article 123 an innovation; but at the same time it raises doubts as to whether the Mexican constituents so distrusted the protection which an ordinary law might afford their revolutionary conviction that they preferred to shield them with the constitution, which is more difficult to amend and politically impossible to abolish.

It does not seem to me that the Mexican Revolution found its best expression in the spoken or written word, but in the psychology and morale of the whole country. By 1920 the Mexican Revolution had no longer a single enemy within the country, and although the United States did not recognize the government of Obregón, the government and the country at large were self-confident. For the first time in ten long years it was felt that there was order and presence of an accepted authority. The world was going through a period of prosperity which reached Mexico. But above all else, naturally, there was enormous expectation of the great reconstruction work to be initiated by the Revolution. Not "everybody" but certainly large numbers everywhere felt that exalted sensation of man turned into a god, of man with creative genius and will, with the faith that from his hands may come a new, great, brilliant, harmonious and kind world; faith, also, that nothing is impossible and that anything may be achieved by simply willing it.

The explanation of how the Mexican Revolution passed from that initial stage—exalted, secure, generous—to the one in which we now find ourselves is complicated and difficult. Although I believe that this explanation is necessary in order to know where the Revolution stands now and even in order to imagine where it may go, I shall barely attempt to sketch it.

It is a generally accepted observation that a revolution always produces a corresponding reaction; but in our case there is a particular circumstance to be considered. The drive and the energy of the Revolution were consumed much more in destroying the past than in constructing the future. As a result, the past certainly disappeared, but the new present came into being and began to develop haphazardly, so that, for lack of another image to imitate, it finally ended by becoming equal to the destroyed past. From this standpoint the reaction won a complete victory over the Revolution, since it has succeeded in taking the country back to the exact point where it was when the Revolution broke out. I mean "the exact point" where Mexico was before the Revolution in the sense of the general menial outlook prevailing now in the country, but not in the sense that the country itself is like the Mexico of 1910, and much less in the sense of what Mexico will be like in ten or twenty years.

Why has this happened, or why has it happened to this extent? Many factors would have to be taken into account in order to give a complete picture, but one seems to be outstanding: the lack of ideologists to formulate the Mexican Revolution, to indicate its course and, once it was under way, the unavoidable nut deplorable fact that the people who were youngest, most prepared, intelligent and honest joined the government in only minor posts. Therefore, they neither truly inspired the policy or the plans of the Revolution, nor served it by criticizing them, as they would have done had they been outside the government, in congress r the press, for example. The press, for its part, from the beginning took a stand
opposed to the government until the government ceased to be revolutionary and became conservative. Since then, they live as harmoniously as partners in a business enterprise.

The fact is that, in one way or another, the present situation has been reached. What is this situation?

The economy is sound, judged from a classical liberal point of view, so much so that it is often commented that Mexico has made phenomenal progress in recent years. More strictly examined, it is possible to find rather weak points in this economy, such as the fact that some official and semiofficial enterprises depend ultimately on the fiscal resources of the federal government. Mexico likewise faces the serious problem of an unpromising future for its visible exports. A declining market for its metals and principal agricultural exports, together with ever-increasing imports, placed it in a difficult situation. However, it may be stated that the present economic conditions of Mexico do not create insoluble problems and that they are no more serious than those of, for example, the Latin American countries and, in general, any country in the world with similar resources and history.

Nor is the apparent social situation bad. The constant improvement of communications since 1925 has given the Mexican population a mobility which it formerly lacked, making it easier to move to places where there are prospects of better work and salaries. The general level of public health has risen, as is shown by the fall in the general mortality rate and the increase in life expectancy. A-worthy effort has been made in the field of education, although not proportionate to the headlong increase in our population and the greater needs of today's children and young people. The social security services although not as broad and general as would be desired, have been extended to a notable and promising extent.

Strictly speaking, the only problem of great magnitude is the rate at which the population and the national product grow. Since demographic trends change only very slowly, it seems better to look at it from that angle, and not, as it is: quite possible to do, from the point of view of readjustment of investments and production. The rate of population growth is all the more serious because, alongside a high and sustained birth rate, the infant mortality rate tends to decline slowly but surely. It is possible that this population increase may very well strain the country's physical, human and economic resources and that if energetic measures are not taken, it may present a very serious problem. Until now, the rate of economic growth has surpassed, generally speaking, that of population. But there is more than one reason to suspect that this situation cannot be indefinitely maintained and that even she more or less normal ups and downs of the economic development of any country may produce disproportionate disequilibria, precisely because of the lack of a margin which permits time to act during years of pause or recession.

The political situation is decidedly less satisfactory than the economic and social. The only tangible progress is the periodic and regular renewal of the Mexican rulers: the president of the Republic, the governors of the States, and the municipal authorities and federal and local legislative bodies. But their election is far from popular, being decided by personalist forces that rarely or never represent the genuine interests of large human groups. The economic and political power of the president of the Republic is almost all-embracing and is exercised in the designation of public servants of almost all categories and areas of the country. And since it is impossible for one man to know the special needs of each city or town, and which person or persons are most suitable to resolve them, most of the choices of the great elector are deplorably inadequate, and in any event they do not please anyone, because they are not the result of the free play of the political interests and aspirations of the groups concerned. . . .

On Mexico's horizon, nonetheless, there is a black cloud that few Mexicans and foreigners have noticed until now. . . .

It seems to me that the essential characteristics of the Mexican Revolution were these: to entrust to the State, and not to the individual nor to private enterprise, the promotion of the general welfare of the
country; to make this general welfare the principal or only goal of the action of the State so that its economic and technical resources as well as its moral influence would be used to better the lot of the farmers and laborers, the teachers and the bureaucracy, and so forth. The Mexican Revolution had, moreover, a strong popular flavor, not only in the sense already described, in attempting to satisfy first the needs of the poor, but in believing that the people, the Indians, themselves, have virtues which must be recognized, respected and enhanced. The dominant idea during the good years of the Revolution, let us say 1920-1925, was that the Mexican Indian had so many natural qualities that the problem of education lay in teaching him modern work techniques, but without contaminating him or modifying his general way of life: his traditional courtesy and reserve, his artistic sensitivity and capacity, etc. And it was also a revolution that exalted the national at the expense, naturally, of the foreign.

What is left of all this? In truth, little or nothing.

In the first place, let us look at the situation of the government in Mexican society. Its political power is almost unlimited: that of the president in all the Republic; that of the governors in their respective States as regards local matters; and that of the municipal authorities in their respective jurisdictions as regards the minor matters that they manage. . . .

In the sphere of economic action, the authority and force of the State have become less and less vigorous and decisive, to the extent that it is now possible to say that the State is the prisoner of private enterprise. If it wanted to fight, the government would win, even using only legal means, such as, for example, fiscal measures. But the government does not want to fight or even to disagree with private enterprise. It is already remarkable—and this in itself describes the situation—that a considerable increase in the number and size of public needs—which would have to be reflected in an increase in budget expenditure—has not been matched by a change in tax rates or by the creation of new taxes.

The situation has developed broadly in this way. The state rightly considered at a certain moment that Mexico could not progress very much if it relied on agriculture and mining, its two traditional occupations; therefore, the country should industrialize, at least until it would be one-third agricultural, one-third mining and one-third industrial. To achieve this goal, the State took the initiative in the establishment or expansion of certain industries. But in most cases, it waited for private enterprise to carry out the undertakings. For this purpose, and in accordance with classical liberal reasoning, the State proposed to create "a favorable climate" for private enterprise, and this was to be done, naturally, by the classical means: political arid social stability; inflexible wage rates; low taxes; easy credit and other secondary aids.

The State was not mistaken either in its initial reasoning or in the methods it used to achieve industrialization, for it is estimated that in effect 60% of industrial investment to date comes from private sources. But the State made several important errors which have finally led to the situation in which we now find ourselves. One was that it never drew up a general framework of the industrial activities which were most suitable for the country, so that private enterprise would only undertake those that fitted into that general framework. In the second place, the State has been unsuccessful in restricting inflation so that the real wages of the labor force have clearly diminished, and it is the workers who ultimately are paying for the industrial progress of Mexico. In the third place, as an inevitable consequence, economic influence has begun to be converted into political influence, so that the State today would have difficulty in taking a fundamental economic policy measure without consulting the country's great banking and industrial firms or, in fact, without counting on their approval beforehand. For these reasons and some others quite as important, the final outcome is that while 16% of the Mexican families get 50% of the national income, 46% of those families got only one-seventh of such income.
I must add one word, not about the political or economic strength of the government, but about its moral authority. It has been at a low point for several years, and for many reasons. One of them is the most important, however. AM men participating in the country's public life, all politicians, as they are commonly named, talk as if we were living in 1920, 1928 or 1938 at the latest. They talk as if the Mexican Revolution were very much alive, as if its original goals were still prevailing, as if large and small government policies were inspired and adopted to reach those goals in the shortest possible time and to the fullest possible measure. It seems, however, that moral authority usually rests on the man whose deeds match his word and whose words do not go beyond his deeds.

This situation explains why there has been a considerable weakening of the popular meaning and nationalist note found in the Mexican Revolution during its best period.

It is difficult to give an opinion, even a very tentative one, on whether, Mexico can go back to a course more in keeping with the original objective of the Revolution, and what means it should employ to achieve this, short of new revolution. This is perhaps the principal concern of Mexico's leading men, although I do not know whether there is an agreement, at least as to the principal points toward which the country should direct itself. It may be that the real dilemma for Mexico—as for so many countries in the world—lies in whether grow faster at the top only, or at a slower pace, but benefiting the lower levels of the social pyramid. Whatever may be the proper way, I am quite confident that Mexico will find it soon, for my country has a real genius for getting out of a mess . . . and for getting into a mess.