INTRODUCTION

Aims

The object of this Introduction is to trace a perspective that will help the reader to understand better the meaning of this book. But the meaning of any work—particularly of a historical study—is obviously not something detached from the personal circumstances of the writer, nor is it alien to the intellectual trends and notions of his time. On the contrary, the meaning of a work consists, precisely, in the manner in which its author responds to those trends and notions and in the way it reflects his personal circumstances. If, therefore, our aim is to try to grasp the meaning or significance of Justo Sierra's *The Political Evolution of the Mexican People,* written and published at the beginning of this century, we must endeavor to place the book in its proper historical context, or, in other words, to show where and how it fits into the rather complex intellectual process of Mexican historiography. But in order to do this accurately, we must first try to understand the general situation from which that process derives, and then we must show the stages of its development up to the moment when the work we are concerned with made its appearance.

The Problem

For quite obvious and objective reasons, the Mexican past appears as made up of three easily distinguishable and clearly defined periods.

1. First we have the autochthonous or indigenous period, which springing from the twilight of an uncertain and remote antiquity, came to an end with the crushing victory of the conquering Castilian

hosts. The imprisonment of Cuauhtemoc, the very soul of resistance against the invader, marks dramatically the close of the first period.

2. Next we have the colonial period, which for three centuries followed its slow, but only in appearance monotonous course. We may place the end of it in 1810, when Hidalgo rose in arms against viceregal rule, or else, and perhaps more exactly, in 1821, when Agustín de Iturbide won political independence for the country.

3. The third period, finally, corresponds to Mexico's existence as a nation, strictly speaking.

In view of this heterogeneous pattern, it should not be hard to see that the Mexican historian's central problem has been how to comprehend his past as being all of one piece, without failing to recognize the uniqueness of the two earlier periods. The great problem, in other words, was how to conceive of Mexico's historical development as a unified whole, yet accounting for its plural objective reality. And, as we shall see, the book by Justo Sierra owes its importance precisely to its attainment of this difficult aim. But let us not anticipate; let us rather consider, first, the peculiar form that this problem took, in order to show thereafter how it was solved.

In all truth, it would be misleading, however, to say that the question of attaining a unified concept of Mexican history was foremost in the minds of the pioneer Mexican historians who wrote in the aftermath of their country's independence. While this was undoubtedly the central question, for the time being it was latent and not clearly visible due to the urgency of solving another problem—one that did indeed demand the immediate attention of these men. They all, and with good reason, felt under compulsion to explain what indeed seemed to be the tremendous historic failure of independence. Let us look closely at the situation.

The price Mexico had to pay for its independence, in lives and in economic ruin, was staggering. But independence had finally been won, and considering the hopes for the future those losses seemed justified. One of the mainsprings of revolution, perhaps the principal one, had been the desire to emulate the great neighboring republic on the north, which had become an international power overnight.

Throughout the struggle, whether fighting under the banners of the Insurgents or under those of Iturbide's Army of the Triple Guarantee, the Mexicans never lost sight of the example set by those northern colonies and their immense success in having united under a federative form of government. Why, then, should not New Spain expect to enjoy the same good fortune? Why, then, should not Mexico come to occupy, within the same short term of years, a place in the sun as eminent, if not more prominent, as the one achieved by its Anglo-Saxon neighbors? On every side, in manifestos, in proclamations, in speeches, one may still hear the echo of that hope, of that promise. But from the moment that a monarchy was adopted as the first form of government it began to be plain—and when this failed it was still plainer—that that dream of grandeur which had inspired the struggle against Spain was fading. There was more than a hint of magic-making in the adoption of a federal formula, next, in 1824. Indeed, this system of government, so alien to the inhabitants and to their traditions, was imposed on the country like a sort of miraculous balm, warranted to cure all its troubles and to bring progress and happiness. The first federal republic, it is true, managed to survive eleven years; not, however, eleven years of progress and peace, but years of turmoil and personal greed, for this was a training period for the politicians learning to play the fascinating game of how to climb the steps that led to the presidential chair. Attempt after attempt was made, in appallingly rapid succession, to set up new forms of government, all invariably accompanied by riots, barracks revolts, and revolutions which portrayed the dismal picture of the nation's first decades of existence. But let us not forget—and we would be ungrateful if we did not remember—that, along with ambition, betrayal, and crime, there were present always self-abnegation, patriotism, and good faith. And yet the upshot was that independence, far from fulfilling its dazzling promise, appeared to have brought only economic ruin, political disorder, administrative chaos, and a general weakening of the social ties and fibers. There is no need to dwell on this somber picture: the reader will find it fully described in the book he holds in his hands.

Enough has been said here, no doubt, to make it clear that the

main problem confronting the pioneer Mexican historian was how to account for a disaster that was totally unexpected. It was a problem born of disillusionment, of seeing hopes that had seemed certain to bear fruit come to nothing.

Such was the starting-point of Mexican historiographical thought. We must not lose sight of it if we want to understand the progress of its development.

First Phase of the Process

When the men of that day beheld the catastrophic situation into which the country had plunged after winning its independence, and asked themselves in anguish what could have caused the disaster, they found ready-made, so to speak, two explanations, different in their contents, yet both stemming from roots of the same stock. There was the explanation that we may call providentialistic, and the explanation that we may class as idealistic.

According to the first, the course of history is directed and ruled by a divine will. Thus, if the annals of a given people exhibited a picture of anarchy and desolation, such as did those of the Mexican nation in its early years, it followed that the divine arbiter of history had ruled against that people. Could not that be the way to account for the Mexican disaster? Did not the events of Mexico's independent history plainly show God's displeasure? And, lastly, could it not be that independence had been condemned by God as a rebellious act against his wishes, and could not the calamities that plagued the inhabitants of New Spain thus be accounted for?

The second explanation, that which we classed as idealistic, was of a less archaic stamp, but equally transcendental. According to it the march of history, though surely not directed by the supposed will of a just God, was nevertheless ruled by the purpose of a metaphysical entity vaguely designated as Nature, an entity even more threatening, since it excluded the possibility of appeal to pardon through repentance. The intentions harbored by this entity could be discerned, not in the punishing of a rebellious people, but in a parcel of invariable characteristics, which clearly showed that people to be congenitally

inferior, and hence incapable of governing themselves and of shaping their own destinies. Was not this, then, the reason for the national disaster? Did not the Mexican people, when they shook off Spanish tutelage, give plain proof of their native inferiority, since their political incompetence was so obvious?

Here, then, to choose from, were the two theses that offered an explanation to the Mexican historical problem. However and quite apart from the fact that both were of foreign origin, and dated from a distant past, it is clear that neither one could gain the acceptance of a nation who would thereby damn itself in the eyes of God, or else in the eyes of Humanity. Both solutions, of course, had to be rejected. But since it was out of the question to assume that the national catastrophe could be attributed to a supposed divine wrath, or to a supposed natural inferiority, to whom, then, could it be attributed? Who was to be held responsible?

In thus stating the problem we have shown the enormous importance of the two metahistorical theses that we have just expounded. For, while it is true that they were rejected, it is no less true that they left their mark by inducing historians to pose the national problem as a question of guilt, and thereby to fall into the facile, misleading, and pernicious mistake of seeking someone on whom to cast the blame.

Second Phase of the Process

Mexican historians, in their rejection of the idea of divine wrath and that of congenital inferiority, were, for obvious reasons, unanimous. But now, when we find them setting out on the search for a culprit on whom to blame the disaster, we see them sharply divided into two fields, which correspond to the two great ideological tendencies that have dominated Mexican history until fairly recent times. I refer to the conservative tendency—traditionalist, Catholic, and monarchical—and to its liberal opposite—modern, atheist, and republican. Let us examine the solutions offered by each in its turn.

According to the spokesmen for the first group, the country owed its chaotic condition, clearly, to a single nefarious fact, to wit: the influence of modern ideology on Mexican public life, which amounted

to a deadly attack on the Latin and Catholic traditions that constituted the very foundation of the national structure. But who was to blame for this? No doubt about it: a small group of wicked Mexicans who had let itself be seduced by that ideology, the so-called liberals. The real responsibility, however, was farther to be sought, for they could not have done so much harm by themselves. The liberals were actually nothing more than instruments of a machination against the country—a machination conceived, guided, and fomented by the United States, that great malignant power which, with sinister ends, was sowing internal strife and preventing Mexico from advancing along the path of peace and progress.

The spokesmen for the second group showed the exact reverse of the medal. If Mexico, they said, has not attained the glorious destiny that awaits it, and finds itself torn by poverty and civil war, it is because the old ideology inherited from the Colony is still being imposed on every order of public life. The small number of reactionary Mexicans who try to hold on to their former privileges by resorting to the arms of ignorance and superstition are the ones directly to blame. But in this case, as in the preceding one, the real blame was allowed to gravitate beyond that group. The culprit, here, was not the United States, which, while viewed with some suspicion, continued to be admired, but the Spanish monarchy, bent on recovering its dominion, and the Roman Catholic Church, whose top hierarchy within the national territory was believed to be a nucleus of treason.

It is important to note that this second phase of the process shares with the preceding one the same attempt to explain our national history by resorting to a force or a power outside of its own sphere. Progress has been made, however, because that force or power is no longer infinite and transcendental (God or Nature), but finite and historical, as embodied in the United States, or the Spanish monarchy and the Papacy, as the case may be. It cannot be said, therefore, that the second phase is, like the first, of a metahistorical nature, and here we see a forward step. We must not fail to observe, however, that a relative aspect of that nature may be said to remain in the new solutions proposed by liberals and conservatives both, for while it is true that the culprits held responsible are located now within the bounds of history,

it is still true that they represent forces placed beyond the bounds of the national history. We may say, then, that if the first phase is meta-historical, in an absolute sense, the second phase also is, but in a relative sense.

It is easy to perceive, at this juncture, that the next step must consist in accepting the responsibility instead of trying to unload its weight on alien shoulders. But, in order to show how so decisive a step was taken, we must point out, first, a most important consequence that was implied in both of the theses under discussion.

Each of them, indeed, contains a peculiar assumption as to the being of the Mexican people. The first thesis, traditional-conservative, assumes the protagonist of national history to be the same as that of colonial history. According to this view, the Mexican nation still is the New Spain, which, on arriving at maturity, demanded political independence, but did not thereby lose its historic identity. Thus, we can easily understand why the liberal modern ideas of the Anglo-Saxon world appeared to be an attack directed at the very heart of the national being. The second thesis, the modern-liberal one, assumes, on the other hand, the true protagonist of the national history to be the same one as that of pre-Hispanic Mexican history. According to this thesis, the colonial period is purely negative, something to be treated, actually, as nonexistent. The Mexican nation is not, therefore, identified with New Spain, as in the preceding case, but with the ancient indigenous empire, which, it is assumed, maintained its historic identity throughout three centures of unjust servitude. This explains perfectly why the traditional Catholic ideology of the Colony was considered as deserving the blame for the national disaster that followed on independence.

Keeping these things in mind, we see that the progress involved in the second phase was not made without cost. The price, indeed, was a split in the way in which the very being of the Mexican people was conceived, a schism and duality which found expression in bitter polemics and in a long series of violent acts.

Third Phase of the Process

The process of understanding the Mexican past, as we have seen, ran into a contradiction that seemed to be insoluble. Having started

from the premise that the Mexican people was not to blame for the turmoil in its national life, the historians arrived at opposing concepts as to the very being of that people. It was therefore necessary to resolve this duality somehow. Let us see how this difficult goal was reached.

When an ideological process is paralyzed by internal contradiction, the cause must generally be sought in the original premise. Could it not be, then, that the error common to both the liberal and the conservative theses arose from the fact that both started from a false initial estimation concerning the events of the nation's history after independence? Here is the doubt that opened the door to a solution. Indeed, what is essential in the new development is the belief that the chaotic picture of the nation's independent life only appears as such when the attempt is made to explain it as the outcome of a blame, no matter whether the guilt is laid to the colonial tradition or to modern Anglo-Saxon ideology. The new historians will insist that these two tendencies must be understood as historical circumstances which, while they do enter into conflict, do not exclude each other mutually, like two enemies, but combine in a synthesis that will create a new situation. Considered in this light, the nation's independent history only reveals the painful process through which that synthesis is achieved, and therefore, despite appearances, it should be regarded as a spectacle of positive meaning, in which no question of guilt is involved, but only a problem of self-responsibility. One should not then see in that history a disaster caused by malignant foreign interference, but simply a historical process prompted by the supreme law of evolution.

Such, in few words, is the gist of the third phase of Mexican historiographical thought. It is distinguished from the preceding phase in that the explanation of the national past is placed within its own bounds, so that the fundamental notion that the Mexican people is in truth responsible for its own destiny finally appears. But, and this is the crucial question, just who is this people?

Up to this moment, as we have seen, the concept of the Mexican people's identity was hung on the horns of a dilemma: it was either a sort of mystical extension of New Spain, or it was the ancient pre-Hispanic empire, which somehow had remained mysteriously intact

throughout the three colonial centuries. The new thesis obviously rejects both notions. According to this, the Mexican people is neither the one thing nor the other: the Mexican people is an entirely new entity on the stage of history and is neither the Spaniard of the colony, nor the Indian of Moctezuma's empire. The Mexicans, says Justo Sierra, are "the sons of the two peoples, of the two races," and this fact, he adds, "dominates our whole history; to this we owe our soul." They are, then, the result of a long process of racial and spiritual amalgamation which began in the Conquest and went on through the colony. It was this process that produced the mestizo, a name applied not only to a racial variety, but also to a type of man that has played a special role in history.

By understanding the Mexican people in this manner, it was possible not only to rise above the duality of the preceding phase, but to achieve a unified concept of the three distinctive periods in its history. In other words, the great historiographical problem set forth at the beginning of this essay was finally solved. Thanks, indeed, to the mestizo's promotion to the role of protagonist of the national drama, it was possible to regard the two earlier peirods as integrated parts of his past. The reason is obvious: The mestizo can claim the indigenous past as his own, as a peculiar and original form of historic life, notwithstanding that as a social and political structure it ceased to exist with the onslaught of the conquerors. But he can also claim the colonial past as his own, considered as a form of culture, admitting, however, that the viceregency is not an episode in the annals of Mexico, but belongs to the history of Spain.

This third phase, essentially based on the theory of evolution, implies, when compared with earlier phases, immense progress in the efforts of the Mexican to understand and to shoulder his past. Clearly, the process has not stopped at this point. I have tried to show, in other essays, that the progress made since then consists in overcoming the great fallacy implicit in the evolutionary thesis, which creates a gap between a people and their history, for it conceives of the latter as something that merely "happens to" the former, and not as something that is a constituent part of their being. But any further explanation of

this new phase would exceed the limits of our present aims, since the preceding phase found its most finished expression in the work by Justo Sierra which the reader now holds in his hands. Such, therefore, is the significance of the book; such, therefore, its imperishable value as a turning point in Mexican historiographical thought.

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