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National Identity Building in Mexican Historiography during the Nineteenth Century.

An Attempt at Synthesis

Rodrigo Díaz-Maldonado

ABSTRACT

This paper proposes a conceptualisation of the main modalities of historical consciousness in Mexican historiography during the nineteenth century. These modalities are based on the analysis of different overarching historical narratives that were intended to produce a new national identity after the War of Independence (1810-1821). These narratives disclose different notions about the utility of historical knowledge and the relationship between past and present. Consequently, in the first place it is presented a brief discussion of the interaction between the concepts of historical consciousness and national identity. Secondly a succinct historical background of the Colonial period is provided. Finally, through the examination of specific historical works and authors, the three modalities of historical consciousness that have been identified are presented; the past as will, the past as experience and the past as memory.

KEYWORDS: Mexican Historiography, Historical Consciousness, National Identity, Will, Experience, Memory.

1. INTRODUCTION

IN this article I will present some of the most prominent features of nineteenth century Mexican historiography. As in Europe after the French Revolution, in Mexico after the War of Independence, it is possible to find different forms of historical consciousness, most of them related to the construction of national identity. Once the political bond with Spain was dissolved (1821), Mexican intellectuals faced the problem of producing a new configuration of the social order in which they had to live, that is, a new idea of nation. Thus, the new nation was created, at least partially, through a vast number of overarching narratives that disclose diverse concepts of the nature of historical knowledge and its relevance to public life.¹ In Mexico, as in many other places, the construction of a shared national past responded to practical and precise needs in the field of politics, that is, in the area of planning a collective future. As political and social circumstances changed, Mexican historians not only preferred to highlight some parts of the past rather than others, but also transformed the way of projecting their *findings* into the social world they were trying to explain

¹ There is a vast literature on the shaping of national narratives in Europe. For an introduction to the main problems related to this subject see especially: Stefan Berger, "National historiographies in the transnational perspective: Europe in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries", *Storia della Storiografia* 50 (2006): 3-26 (which includes a considerable bibliography) and *Narrating the Nation. Representations in History, Media and the Arts*, ed. by Stefan Berger, Linas Eriksonas and Andrew Mycock (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2008).

or redeem. In other words, they gradually changed not just the ingredients in their idea of nation, but also the way in which they thought about the utility of historical knowledge.²

Accordingly, I will present some Mexican authors who are representative of this, having conceived different ways to utilise the past to face the challenges posed by the significant cultural, political and economical changes that took place throughout the century. I will consider how these authors created specific images of a national past and how they used those images to promote their political expectations. Notwithstanding the ideological or interpretive differences among them, in my view, their distinct uses of the past can be grouped into three modalities: (1) the past as will (2) the past as experience, and (3) the past as memory. I will explain this terminology but, for now, I will say that these terms refer to different concepts of the relationship between past and present, concepts which are not mutually exclusive. This means that any concrete historical representation may include the three modalities, although one usually dominates. For example, even if in some cases the past may be primarily related to the present as an allegedly unbiased form of national memory, this does not eliminate the volitional or practical aspects of this relationship, only places them in a second plane.

It is important to notice here that the vast majority of studies which address nineteenth century Mexican historiography have done so from a specialised point of view (the study of one author, one work or one topic). In other cases, this historiography has been seen as a source for political or administrative history. It has seldom been treated as a separate field with its own processes and dynamics.³ This lack of comprehensive view is more evident when compared with the significant number of works devoted to nineteenth century European historiography.⁴ One possible explanation

² Hayden White has recently recovered Michael Oakeshott's distinction between practical and historical pasts, to sustain that "in practical life, the historical past and knowledge of that past are of little or any use". Even when I find this distinction quite convincing for contemporary historical practice, I also believe that there is an irreducible practical element even in the most "objective" historical representations, especially in those produced before the professionalization of historical discipline. Consequently, in this article I will explore the practical (political) dimension of the historical past as represented in the Mexican historiographical tradition. See Hayden White, *The Practical Past* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2014), preface.

³ The bibliography on Mexican political thinking during the nineteenth century is extremely large. However, to my knowledge the problem of the relationship between historical consciousness and national identity has not yet been directly addressed, save for some insights included in works mostly devoted to the colonial period, which in contrast has been extensively treated. The classics are: Benjamin Keen, *The Aztec Image in the Western Thought* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1971); Jacques Lafaye, *Quetzalcóatl et Guadalupe. La formation de la conscience nationale au Mexique* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1974); David A. Brading, *Los orígenes del nacionalismo mexicano* (México: ERA, 1980); David A. Brading, *Prophecy and Myth in Mexican History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); David A. Brading, *The First America. The Spanish monarchy, Creole patriots, and the Liberal state, 1492-1867* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991). More recently, Guy Rozat, *Los orígenes de la nación. Pasado indígena e historia nacional* (México: Universidad Iberoamericana, 2001); Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra, *How to Write the History of the New World. Historiographies, Epistemologies and Identities in the Eighteenth Century Atlantic World* (Stanford: Stanford University press, 2002); Antonio Rubial-García, *El paraíso de los elegidos. Una lectura de la historia cultural de Nueva España (1521-1804)* (México: UNAM, 2010).

⁴ Overviews of the European historiography in the nineteenth century appeared very early in the twentieth century. See, for example: Eduard Fueter, *Geschichte der Neueren Historiographie* (München und Berlin: R. Oldenbourg, 1911), Spanish version: *Historia de la historiografía moderna* (Buenos Aires: Nova, 1953);

of this absence could be that Mexican historical thinking does not fit easily into the standard categories of the history of ideas. Well-known concepts such as the Enlightenment or Romanticism, have acquired connotations in Mexico that greatly differ from their European applications. For this reason, when these concepts are used to explain Mexican historiography, the results tend to generate more confusion rather than to bring clarity.⁵ Therefore, what I propose here aims to be a small contribution towards solving this problem. Evidently, I will not offer a complete overview of the history of Mexican historiography but only a conceptualisation of its main modalities. This attempt does not use any labels or concepts designed for other historiographical traditions, but attends only to the way the past was actually conceived in Mexican historiography. The two axes of my argument are the notions of historical consciousness and national identity. Therefore, I will briefly explain how I understand these notions and the relationship between them.

2. HISTORICAL CONSCIOUSNESS AND NATIONAL IDENTITY

I understand historical consciousness as the mental relationship that people have with their past. That is, the place that individuals or communities give to the past in shaping the present. It is clear that the degree of influence granted to the past affects many social and individual behaviours. Any significant activity, that is, any activity that exceeds the merely instinctive, is modelled on the basis of a certain concept of the past. Alternative solutions to a specific social problem base their viability and justification on equally specific readings of that problem's history. The same applies to current experiences that shape the reality around us. An ongoing revolution, for example, may be treated as a social catastrophe or as the advent of a new era of progress and freedom, depending on how observers and participants read the past.⁶ Thus, the past may become a part of the present, either as a positive element that contributes to the future or as a burden that must be rejected. In a given time, the forms of appropriation and integration of the past are relatively homogeneous

George Peabody Gooch, *History and Historians in the Nineteenth Century* (London and New York: Longman, Green and Co., 1913); and Benedetto Croce, *Teoria e storia della storiografia* [1917] (Bari: Laterza & Figli, 1920). This seems to be a historiographical tradition without interruption throughout the twentieth century, although produced from very different perspectives. See, for more recent examples: Georg Iggers, *The German Conception of History. The National Tradition of Historical Thought from Herder to the Present* (New York: Wesleyan University, 1968); Hayden White, *Metahistory. The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973); Hans Kellner, *Language and Historical Representation: Getting the Story Crooked* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989); Michael Bentley, *Modern Historiography. An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1999); John Burrow, *A History of Histories* (New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 2008).

⁵ An interesting example of this is provided by David A. Brading, who wonders whether it would be "too much to suggest that José Vasconcelos [1882-1959] was the first Mexican romantic", almost a hundred years after the decline of European romanticism. See David A. Brading, "Patriotismo y nacionalismo en la historia de México", *Actas del XII Congreso Internacional de Hispanistas*, ed. by Trevor J. Dadson (Birmingham: University of Birmingham, 1995), 1-18, 14.

⁶ Obviously, this also affects the epistemological and methodological dimensions, see Reinhart Koselleck, 'Erfahrungswandel und Methodenwechsel', in Id., *Zeitschichten. Studien zur Historik* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2000), 27-78. For this article I consulted the Spanish translation Reinhart Koselleck, "Cambio de experiencia y cambio de método. Un apunte histórico-antropológico" in *Los estratos del tiempo: estudios sobre la historia* (Barcelona-Buenos Aires-México: Ediciones Paidós, 2001), 43-92.

because they are based not only in the thoughts and feelings of individuals but in collective interests and values. This implies the possibility of establishing typologies that may help to understand long-term processes. In this sense, to show the constituent elements of a specific historical consciousness, through analysing individual historiographical works, may produce a better understanding of the deeper motivations and vital impulses of the different groups that contend for social dominance in a given time.⁷

Historical consciousness is explicitly manifested in all the intellectual products that directly deal with the past, no matter how they are presented. Throughout history, it has been displayed by myths, legends, chronicles, tales and artistic representations. Among other functions, all these creations were used to explain the future by establishing some kind of relationship between past and present. In the present day, and also for nearly 200 years, Western culture has partially satisfied its need to explain the world through history conceived as a professional discipline,⁸ that is, through an institutionalised discourse that has guidelines, conventions and relatively strict rules that allow its transmission, reproduction and evaluation.⁹ This form of discourse was consolidated in the nineteenth century, and one of its main themes was the formation of nations and their political existence as States.¹⁰ This affinity between historiography and politics (in the broad sense) leads us to the other key concept of my argument, national identity.

During the nineteenth century, both in Europe and in Spanish America, nations were the most prominent objects of historiographical representation. There are numerous reasons why this is so, but I will point out the one I consider the most basic: the social and political configurations that we call nations were formed during the

⁷ This approach is not new. My interpretation is based on the dialectics of ideas and beliefs formulated by José Ortega y Gasset in the 1930s (see: José Ortega y Gasset, *Historia como sistema*, and *Ideas y creencias*, in *Obras completas* (Madrid: Fundación Ortega y Gasset, 2004-2010), volumes V and VI, respectively). In this case, I take historical consciousness to be a kind of belief, basic and unquestioned, about the nature and function of the past, while ideas are the specific, concrete, and changing content within a given frame of beliefs. In other words: as we will see two authors could differ widely on a particular aspect of the past (e.g., the degree of civilization attained by pre-Hispanic peoples) and, consequently, on the possible ways to resolve the current situation of the indigenous population; but they both share the belief that historical knowledge, formulated within certain common parameters, is the basis and justification for *any* project in the future.

⁸ See Johan Huizinga, *El concepto de historia y otros ensayos* (tr. Wenceslao Roces, México: FCE, 1946), 87-97.

⁹ The best known reflection on this point is Michel de Certeau, *L'Écriture de l'histoire* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1975), especially ch. II "L'opération historiographique" where the conditions of possibility of historical discourse are analyzed in three axes: social, practical and representational. These same concepts can be found much earlier, for example, in José Gaos, "Notas sobre historiografía", *Historia Mexicana*, vol. ix, no. 4 (April-June 1960): 481-508. For a comparative analysis on the concept of historiographical operation: Rebeca Villalobos-Álvarez, "La operación historiográfica en la teoría de la historia contemporánea", *Cátedra Edmundo O'Gorman. Teoría e historia*, ed. by Alfonso Mendiola and Luis Vergara (México: Universidad Iberoamericana-UNAM, 2011), 49-78.

¹⁰ It was probably Hegel the first one to point out the interdependence between State (understood as an ethical-political totality) and historiography, in the sense that the State is not only the most suitable subject for historical representation, but that its formation implies the existence of its own historical representation. See Hayden White, *The Content of the Form. Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), specially ch. 1, "The value of narrativity in the representation of reality", 1-25.

nineteenth century. The enormous social and cultural changes produced by this formation process are, consequently, the content and theme of historiography. This is so because historical consciousness is always linked, directly or indirectly, to political and social concerns. However, historiography is not only a passive receptacle of worldly agitation; on the contrary, historiography actively contributes to creating the nations and actively participates in the political struggle by promoting different concepts of national identity.¹¹

Hence nations are, among other things, cultural artefacts constructed by a claimed continuity between past, present and future.¹² This continuity constitutes their identity.¹³ The construction takes place in many areas, such as discourses, representations, modes of sociability and political practices. Historiography is only one of these spaces but, as we saw, it is an area of special interest because within it we find the direct and more elaborated expressions of national identity. The different modalities of national identity in nineteenth century historiography were conceived as contributions to the political debate, not just as products of scientific observation. However, the more 'scientific' a representation of national identity was (that is, the more supported in the historical conventions of the time as the 'true' national identity), the greater its potential for political practice. The result seems paradoxical, but it is completely normal: the greater the degree of historical accuracy, the greater the mythical potential of historical representations.¹⁴

In short, we can say that a nation is a particular way of integrating many heterogeneous elements (race, language, traditions, history, etc.) into one single totality which, despite the passage of time, maintains an essential 'identity'. This stability makes possible its discursive representation. Therefore, these "entelechies" (to borrow Frank Ankersmit's expression),¹⁵ arise in and for historiography, disclosing also different modalities of historical consciousness. Their consequences, however, exceed by far the level of pure intellectual debate, affecting the world of practical politics and social life. One of the most important elements in the building of a national identity is, without doubt, the integration of the society allegedly covered by that national identity. In New Spain, and later in independent Mexico, the dilemma of national identity centred around the need to unify an ethnically and culturally divided society. That is why the presence of indigenous peoples was one of the most constant

¹¹ For a critical perspective on this roll of historiography, see Alan Megill, "Historical Representation, Identity, Allegiance", *Narrating the Nation*, ed. by Berger, Eriksonas and Mycock, ch. 1.

¹² I borrow the expression "cultural artefacts" from Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983), 4.

¹³ I shall not discuss the concept of identity as such. For my present purpose, it is enough to say that for historiography the notion of identity is an absolute presupposition because it provides the historian with entities capable of being represented. See, Frank R. Ankersmit, "Historicism: An attempt at Synthesis", *History and Theory* vol. 34, no. 3 (October 1995): 143-161.

¹⁴ Even when I share Chris Lorenz's criticism to William McNeill's notion of "mythistory", my interpretation of the relationship between the practical and epistemological claims of historiography is quite different. For Lorenz, in the case of nineteenth-century European historiography: "The stronger its epistemological claims, the weaker its practical claims - and vice versa". As I will try to show the epistemological and practical claims, at least in the case of Mexican historiography in the nineteenth century, complement each other rather than been opposites. See Chris Lorenz, "Drawing the Line: 'Scientific' History between Myth-making and Myth-breaking", *Narrating the Nation*, ed. by Berger, Eriksonas and Mycock, ch. 2.

¹⁵ Ankersmit, "Historicism: An attempt at Synthesis": 155.

points of attention throughout the nineteenth century and why it will be one of the threads of my argument.¹⁶

3. THE THREE MODES OF HISTORICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

From the late eighteenth century until the late nineteenth century, it is possible to identify three forms for understanding the relationship between past and present in Mexico. Although each one is the result of a complex integration of heterogeneous elements, in the analysis of specific historical discourses, those elements can be grouped into what Jacques Rancière has called a “poetics of knowledge”.¹⁷ According to Rancière, every historical discourse contains a set of “literary procedures by which a discourse escapes literature, gives itself the status of science, and signifies this status”.¹⁸ Each set is constituted by the specific articulation of a commitment which includes three aspects: (1) a scientific contract, which is the particular way by which a discourse “discloses” the “real” order of the world (2) a narrative contract, which is the transformation of that order into a specific kind of story, and (3) a political contract which ties such a represented order to that which is desired for the future of the society to which that discourse belongs. For reasons of space, I will consider here only the interaction between the political and scientific contracts but before that, some short historical antecedents are needed.

4. THE COLONIAL BACKGROUND

Throughout the three centuries following the Spanish Conquest, the conquerors’ descendants, the Creoles, gradually developed a particular form of cultural identity. Naturally, the contours of this identity were not immediately defined. At first, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, it can be detected only in dispersed assertions about the cultural singularity of the Spaniards born in the New World. Such impressions were formulated in all kind of intellectual products, from poetry to natural history. They were songs of praise to the virtues of the New World and its inhabitants. All these works had in common was the fact that they never questioned the colonial order, nor the nature of the social and political relationships in New Spain. Their Creole authors saw themselves as Spaniards, loyal subjects of the Spanish Crown, but also proud of being Americans. Therefore, their views had no subversive character. We will see, however, that this insistence on the Creoles’ uniqueness became very important to the more radical authors, who embraced the insurgency cause in 1810. This was mostly due to the exclusion politics against Creoles, promoted or tolerated by the colonial authorities. Over time, the uniqueness was transformed into a clear demarcation between the two groups and, finally, it became an open exaltation of Creole values, intended to dismiss the Spanish tradition.

By the second half of the eighteenth century the outlines of the Creoles’ cultural identity were already clear. This process of definition was accelerated, among other

¹⁶ For an overview on the indigenous problem and its relation to national identity, especially during the second half of the nineteenth century, see Henri Favre, “Race et Nation au Mexique. De l’indépendance à la révolution”, *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 49, 4 (1994): 951-976. Also see Keen, *The Aztec Image*.

¹⁷ Jacques Rancière, *The Names of History. On the poetics of Knowledge*, translated by Hassan Malehy, foreword by H. White (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1994).

¹⁸ Rancière, *The Names of History*, 8.

things, by the publication in Europe of the works of Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte Buffon (1707-1788), William Robertson (1721-1793) and Cornelius De Pauw (1739-1799).¹⁹ In varying degrees and with different arguments, these authors supported the thesis of the physical and moral inferiority of America and its inhabitants. Obviously, New Spain's intellectuals reacted harshly, and the vindication of the land and its inhabitants was the dominant theme throughout this period. We can find this perspective, for example, in Juan José Eguiara y Eguren (1696-1763), Mariano Veytia (1718-1780), Francisco Xavier Alegre (1729-1788), Antonio León y Gama (1735-1802), and Andrés Cavo (1739-1803), among many others. However, none of these authors argued in favour of New Spain's independence. They still believed that the history of New Spain was an indivisible part of the Spanish Empire's history. Nonetheless, a cultural and social identity was contained in their works in the form of a sublimation of the land and in the exaltation of the spiritual virtues of its (Creole) inhabitants. In their view, New Spain was under the special protection of God, generously dispensed through the Virgin of Guadalupe.²⁰ Its dwellers were designated by Providence to preserve the true (Christian) faith and to project it to the rest of the world. The indigenous peoples were not considered as an active part of the social and political body: they belonged to the remote past, not to the present or future of New Spain.

The break up with the Spanish past, and therefore the birth of a new form of historical consciousness, begins to take shape in 1781 in the work of a Jesuit Creole, exiled in Italy. In the *Historia Antigua de México*, by Francisco Javier Clavijero (1731-1787), the New World's justification acquired an openly polemical and defensive character.²¹ Like many other exiled Jesuits, Clavijero reacted to what he considered European slanders about America²² but with a personal accent: in his discourse, moderate and rigorous, we find probably the first systematic appropriation of the indigenous past. For Clavijero, the Indians were not the Creoles' ancestors; he presented a strong defence of pre-Hispanic history and culture, to assert, by extension, the value of the New World in general. For him, the indigenous past was not a part of the colonial or Creole past, but its preservation could contribute to the Creoles' defence against Europe. In the words of David Brading:

The confident and polemical use of indigenous antiquities made by this Creole priest, born of Spanish parents, points out his identification with that past and, so to speak, his lack of affinity with the Indians of his own time. He assumed the role of defence attorney and, as such, he expropriated the indigenous history for his own patriotic purposes. His work prefigured the insurgents attempt to deny the immediate past by a vehement recurrence to an idealized Indian antiquity.²³

¹⁹ On the European prejudice against America, see the classical work (1955) by Antonello Gerbi, *La Disputa del Nuovo Mondo. Storia di una polemica (1750-1900)* (Milano: Adelphi, 2000 [1st edition 1955]).

²⁰ Luis González y González, "Humboldt y la revolución de Independencia", in *Ensayos sobre Humboldt* (México: UNAM, 1962), 201-214.

²¹ Francisco Javier Clavijero, *Historia Antigua de México* (first published in Italian in 1780), Spanish translation by José Joaquín de Mora (London and Mexico: Ackermann, 1826).

²² The most detailed account of Clavijero's arguments on this subject, an also the best biography is: Charles E. Ronan, *Francisco Javier Clavijero, S. J. (1731-1787). Figura de la Ilustración mexicana; su vida y obras*, Spanish translation by Carlos Ignacio Aguilar (México: Universidad de Guadalajara, 1993): especially chapter V "Críticos de salón contra América", 333-398.

²³ Brading, *Los orígenes del nacionalismo mexicano*, 40. My translation.

It is a fact that, before Clavijero, indigenous history was extensively studied, but it always remained alien and distant: it was the past of 'others', of those who formerly occupied the territory. It was studied, at the beginning of the Spanish dominion, to discover the true nature of the Indians and once it was established that the Indians were human beings, their past was seen as a potential tool for better evangelisation. After that, during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the pre-Hispanic past was gradually transformed into a mythical part of the nature of the New World.²⁴ This vision of a glorious Indian antiquity was largely elaborated by Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora (1645-1700), but in a completely harmless fashion, deprived of any political power because it belonged to natural history. Under the influence of this version of the Indian history, Clavijero constructed his own critical and rational historiography. In doing so, he inadvertently gave subversive powers of nationalist historical discourse to the harmless and baroque myth. Nevertheless, Clavijero was not fully aware of the practical potential of this new historiographical device. He never fused Indians and Creoles into one unit, and never carried on the idea of a separate American history until the point of rupture with the Spanish past. These two things, identification with the Indians and the break with Spanish history, were the building blocks of a new form of historical consciousness. This new modality utilised Indian antiquity as a central element of national identity. However, it was constructed by Creoles and, consequently, it was filled with anachronisms, contradictions and distortions. However, these inconveniences were not a matter of concern: Creole history was not intended to produce scientific knowledge. It was an act of will in the service of politics.

5. THE PAST AS WILL. THE INSURGENT CREOLES

The Creoles who fought for the independence of New Spain shared many of the ideas of their predecessors in the eighteenth century but now these ideas gained a combative character which was absent from their former versions. I will present only two of these authors: Servando Teresa de Mier (1763-1827) and Carlos María de Bustamante (1774-1848), because they wrote the very first historical representations of the War of Independence, and because they explicitly joined the future of the new nation with its pre-Hispanic history. Both were very active in public life before, during and after the war. Their biographies may well be considered as paradigms of an era: they engaged in all kind of adventures, including imprisonments, lucky escapes, heroic combats, triumphs and misfortunes. Their political affinities were as changing and as unstable as the world in which they lived: initially loyal subjects of the Spanish Crown, over time they become fierce Republicans. It is difficult to determine their precise views on any particular topic, because they changed their minds several times over the years, either in the heat of the moment or from intellectual conviction. Nevertheless, they were very consistent in their use of history. In their works we can witness the culmination of the cult of the pre-Hispanic past. In fact, as we will see, they performed a complete and extralogical appropriation of that past. The love they felt for the idealised Indian past, created by the Creole tradition, was a direct result

²⁴ Lafaye, *Quetzalcóatl et Guadalupe*, 96.

of their contempt for the colonial order, which they came to consider cruel and despotic. Consequently, they transformed that past into an ideological weapon to serve the independence cause. However, this love for the ancient Indian world did not correspond to a serious concern about the fate of the Indians in their own time. In their view, the shocking life conditions of the vast majority of the Indian population was only one trouble among the many problems arising from the Spanish domination. Accordingly, their solution to all the suffering was always the same: independence from Spain and the implementation of good laws.

In this light, these authors produced a metaphorical identification between Indians and Creoles, according to which both were the current victims of Spanish despotism. The only difference was that the Indians were the first sufferers. Therefore, the ancient Indians became the first heroes of the resistance, the spiritual ancestors of the Creoles' struggle against oppression. Given this interpretative premise, it is not strange that this appropriation of the Indian past was carried on without any worries about historical criticism. Mier and Bustamante were not concerned with 'historical truth', although they constantly appealed to it. The 'truths' they offered were completely allegorical, because the entities constructed by their discourses are not intended to reflect what actually happened. They talked about something that had not yet happened, a pure act of will: the free nation desired by the Creoles. Their writings were more about expectations than about experiences, to use Koselleck's terminology.²⁵ Let me provide some examples of how this works.

With the help of an utterly fallacious interpretation of etymologies, Mier explained that the ancient Indians who inhabited Mexican territory before the Conquest were actually Christians evangelised by the Apostle Saint Thomas or by one of his disciples. The bloody Indian rituals that for centuries were used as a justification for the Conquest were, according to Mier, nothing more than a variant, albeit extreme, of the Christian Eastern Rite. The Indians were actually a quite devout people, and their cruel religion was only the product of a misunderstanding of the Gospel teachings.²⁶

These reflections are included in the *Appendix* that accompanies Mier's *Historia de la Revolución de Nueva España*, published in 1813, i.e., eight years before the end of the War of Independence. In the next section of his work, which is a simulated dialogue, Mier destroyed all the arguments traditionally used to justify Spanish dominions in America. During the dialogue, Mier assumes the defence of both Indians and Creoles. In the text, each group presents his own list of grievances against Spain separate-

²⁵ Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures past. On the semantics of historical time*, introduction and translation by Keith Tribe (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), especially ch. 14 "Space of Experience and Horizon of Experience: Two Historical Categories".

²⁶ Servando Teresa de Mier, *Historia de la Revolución de Nueva España, antiguamente llamada Anáhuac, o verdadero origen y causas de ella con la relación de sus progresos hasta el presente año de 1813* (México: FCE, 1986, 2. t., facsimile edition), t. 2, XXI from the Appendix. Besides the famous sermon of December 12, 1794, which brought so many calamities to its author, most of Mier's reflections on pre-Hispanic history are to be found in the Appendix cited here. For a detailed study of Mier's thoughts on the Virgin of Guadalupe and the problem of pre-Hispanic evangelization see the "Introduction" by Edmundo O'Gorman in Servando Teresa de Mier, *Obras completas: I. El heterodoxo guadalupano*, preliminary study and selection by E. O'Gorman (Mexico: UNAM, 1981). The best biographical work is: Christopher Domínguez-Michael, *Vida de Fray Servando* (México: Era, 2004).

ly; however it is often difficult to distinguish to which group Mier is referring when he says 'we'. In the end, this distinction is not important, because according to Mier's stance, both groups are dissolved into one larger unity: all were Americans, gathered to face a common foe. In this way, the ancient Indians were transformed into some kind of proto-Creoles, losing almost all their distinctive features, and the Creoles obtained a useful historical past with which to sustain their claims.

Mier's version represents a major shift compared with Clavijero's point of view. To be sure, when Clavijero defended the Indians, he did so from a Creole perspective.²⁷ He never renounced his Spanish heritage. In contrast, Mier saw that legacy as a symbol of oppression and despotism. He considered himself as an American, neither an Indian nor a Creole and even less a Spaniard. Within this context, his bizarre interpretation of the Indian past acquires an important political significance. According to Edmundo O'Gorman, the idea of a pre-Hispanic evangelisation, debated for centuries without consequences, was transformed by Mier, with little effort, into a powerful plea for independence: New Spain did not owe anything to Spain, not even the Gospel's enlightenment.²⁸ With this idea, Mier cancelled the redemptive character the Spaniards had always given to the Conquest which, in turn, was transformed by him into a foreign aggression. Therefore, Mier considered the struggle for independence not only as a political movement, but rather as long-desired historical revenge. With this, he also blurs the distinction between pre-Hispanic and colonial pasts.²⁹ This created the idea of a single Mexican nation, separate from Spain, which existed long before the Conquest. Thus, this new historical entity was born with a millennial past. However, Mier was not entirely sure about the kind of government that should be adopted by the new nation after the separation from Spain. He mainly supported a centralist Republic, but his opinion was not based on a historical consideration of that system's viability. He had in mind the abstract virtues or defects of each form of government, not their concrete application. In the final analysis, Mier always used the past more for its symbolic and allegorical value than for its practical utility.

This appropriation of the pre-Hispanic past for politic proposes was even more explicit, if possible, in the work of Bustamante and, in this matter, he was more radical than Mier. One of his contemporaries, Lucas Alamán, wrote about him in 1849: "His only fixed political principles seem to have been Independence and the Republican government; in everything else he changed constantly [...]".³⁰ Not everything, I could add: his utilisation of the past was another of his fixed principles. Unlike Mier, who claimed only once to be a son of the Aztecs,³¹ Bustamante, direct descendent

²⁷ In Clavijero's words: "If this work [of defending the Indians] was inspired to me by passion or interest, I would rather support the cause of the Creoles, which besides of being easiest, it is in fact the closest to me. My parents were Spaniards, and I do not have any affinity or consanguinity with the Indians, nor the hope of the slightest reward due their misery". Clavijero, *Historia Antigua* t. 2, 213-214. My translation.

²⁸ O'Gorman, "Introduction" in Mier, *Obras completas* I, 70-71.

²⁹ Luis Villoro, *Los grandes momentos del indigenismo en México* (México: Ediciones de La Casa Chata, 1979), 140-143.

³⁰ Lucas Alamán, *Noticias biográficas del licenciado Don Carlos María Bustamante, y juicio crítico de sus obras. Escritas por un amigo de D. Carlos y más amigo de la verdad* (México: tipografía de R. Rafael, 1849), 36.

³¹ And not from any Aztec: "I descend from the last and very dignified [Aztec emperor] who was Cuauhémoc. This is the real reason why I was exiled to Spain 26 years ago, and I was not allowed to come

of Spaniards, constantly refers to the Indians as “our parents” and, therefore, the Conquest was “our ruin”.³² These views were clearly metaphorical, but Bustamante believed them literally.

In his works the Indians are the origin. They are not something alien or strange, but an integral part of the ‘we’ that constitutes the new nation. However, this should not be confused with a genetic, causal or organic perspective. Bustamante does not establish a line of historical continuity between past and present. He does not talk about racial, social or cultural miscegenation. For him the ancient Indians gave a mythical origin to the nation, but present ones are not a part of it in any effective sense. His “parents” were the absent Indians, those who existed only in the National Museum. In contrast, within the dynamics of colonial exploitation depicted by Bustamante, the living Indians occupied the lowest role. He wrote in 1817:

The Spaniards oppress the Creoles, together they oppress the mulattos and blacks. All of them oppress the Indians, and with impudence they blame the Indians for being such. Living in America is like living in the sea: the big fish devours the small fish.³³

Bustamante’s solution to this problem has nothing to do with history, but with the almost magical powers of the law. In 1820, he published a rare pamphlet that was translated into Nahuatl where he suggested to the Indians that they should seek the help of judges by shouting “constitution, constitution” when they were victims of any despotic treatment. The constitution to which he refers was the Cádiz Constitution, which granted equal rights to all citizens. Thanks to it, the Indians were immediately redeemed. Bustamante said to them: “you are no more servants of any lord, you have your own country, and you are not subject to will of any administrator. You do not have to work the lands of others for nothing [...]”.³⁴ This means that the welfare of the Indians lies with themselves: if they work, study, choose their authorities well and demand their rights, they will become citizens as all the others. In this way, Bustamante cancelled the weight of the past or rather, he defined the role of the past only as a symbolic element in the present. The originality of this procedure, which distinguishes Bustamante from Mier, is that the allegorical past formulated by

back, despite having won the quarrel against Archbishop Haro [...]” See Servando Teresa de Mier, *Memoria político instructiva. Enviada desde Filadelfia en Agosto de 1821 a los gefes independientes del Anáhuac, llamado por los españoles Nueva-España*, in *Obras completas IV. La formación de un republicano*, Introduction, edition and notes by Jaime E. Rodríguez (México: UNAM, 1988), 177. My translation.

³² Bustamante’s attitude towards the Conquest was extremely ambiguous. This proves the instability of the national identity that he aimed to build. Indeed, although he shared with Mier the idea of a pre-Hispanic evangelization, Bustamante does not consider settled the debt with Spain: ultimately, for him the Aztec Christianity was a true abomination and its destruction and the establishment of the true Christian faith was something too valuable as to deny the benefits that Spain brought to America. Here, Bustamante’s traditional Catholic faith was stronger than his patriotism. That is why he thinks that the Indians in his time were still suffering a Providential punishment: they were expiating the crime of human sacrifice, which “has covered this beautiful continent with blood, mourning, tears and abominations”. Carlos María de Bustamante, *Mañanas de la Alameda de México* (México: Imprenta de la Testamentaria de Valdés, 1835), 195. My translation.

³³ Carlos María de Bustamante, “El indio mexicano o avisos al Rey Fernando VII para la pacificación de la América Septentrional” [1817], reprinted in *Revista de la Facultad de Derecho UNAM* 75-76 (July-December 1969): 756-809, 784. My translation.

³⁴ Carlos María de Bustamante, “La Malinche de la Constitution” [1820], reprinted in *Estudios de Cultura Náhuatl* 14 (1980): 271-278, 276. My translation.

the former was not based on any historical evidence. In other words, while Mier's opinions were built on a biased reading of pre-Hispanic sources, Bustamante joined the past with the present without any epistemological justification. The relationship between the Indian past and the Creole or Spanish present was created by a pure act of will: Bustamante wanted to see the ancient Indians as the tutelary gods of the nascent nation. In his *Cuadro Histórico de la Revolución Mexicana*, originally published between 1821 and 1827, Bustamante quotes (actually, he was the author) the discourse delivered by José María Morelos (one of the most important heroes of Mexican independence) at the opening session of the Congress of Chilpancingo, summoned in 1813 to prepare the Declaration of Independence:

Spirits of Moctezuma, Cacamatzin, Cuauhtemoc, Xicotencatl and Calzonzi, [...] celebrate this blissful moment in which your children have gathered to avenge the excesses and outrages committed against you, and to free themselves from the clutches of tyranny and fanaticism that seemed to last forever! On the 12th of August of 1521, the chains of tyranny were fastened in Mexico-Tenochtitlan. Those chains are broken on the 14th of September of 1813 in the blessed village of Chilpancingo.³⁵

This kind of historical consciousness does not seek to account for the organisation and consistency of social reality. In fact, this historical thinking is alien to us because it lacks historicity in the sense of portraying a time-structured development. It is, rather, a typological device in the biblical sense of the word: it was used to mark parallels and confirmations between past and present, not their continuity.³⁶ Besides, its intention was to moralise rather than explain. It is true that historians only rarely resist the temptation to moralise but for Bustamante moralising was the basic premise and objective. Most of his works were written in times of political and social crisis. Even so, he never uses history to explain those crises in a causal sense. For him the utility of the past lies in its paradigmatic value. One clear example of this is his essay *Necesidad de la union de todos los mexicanos contra las asechanzas de la Nación Española y de la Liga Europea, comprobada con la historia de la Antigua República de Tlaxcallan*, published in 1826.³⁷ Here, Bustamante explains the nation's actual threats by recounting the history of the Tlaxcala Republic, which in the sixteenth century became an ally of Spain against the Aztec Empire. The moral was simple: the flourishing Aztec Empire was destroyed because of Mexican disunity. The historical fallacy contained in this thesis is entirely irrelevant, because its basis is not knowledge but ideology. For Bustamante, Mexico was an unchanging essence that had always existed. This is confirmed because Bustamante does not offer any explicit conclusion. For him the history of Tlaxcala was very eloquent and speaks for itself, a clear and obvious lesson for all Mexicans.

In conclusion, the form of historical consciousness, exemplified here by Mier and Bustamante, was based on a symbolic appropriation of the pre-Hispanic past intend-

³⁵ Carlos María de Bustamante, *Cuadro Histórico de la Revolución Mexicana* (México: FCE, 1985) 8.t. (facsimile from the second edition of 1844), t.2, 391. My translation.

³⁶ Here I use Northrop Frye's notion of biblical typology. See Northrop Frye, *The Great Code. The Bible and Literature* (New York: Harvest, 1983), 78-101.

³⁷ Carlos María de Bustamante, *Necesidad de la unión de todos los mexicanos contra las asechanzas de la Nación Española y de la Liga Europea, comprobada con la historia de la Antigua República de Talxcallan* (México: Imprenta del Águila, 1826).

ed to serve political and ideological aims. This means that the past was not seen as a possible explanation of the present but was completely devoted to serving the future, to promoting the insurgency cause. However, the Creoles were not yet aware of the dramatic consequences of the War over the next few years. This is why they were able to create a national identity which was extremely unstable and contradictory: for them the true Mexicans were the Creole descendants from Indians! Obviously, a national identity such as this one could be effective for only a short time. Once its practical goal was achieved, it revealed itself as clearly insufficient, giving its place to a new form of historical consciousness and national identity.

6. THE PAST AS EXPERIENCE. THE POLITICIAN-HISTORIANS

The Creoles' ardour for the pre-Hispanic past ended abruptly in 1821.³⁸ The new generation of Mexican intelligentsia, either Liberals or Conservatives, was indifferent or downright hostile to Indian history. Independence was an accomplished fact, and the unstable political and social situation that followed made the panegyrics of identity and symbolic identification with the Indians completely irrelevant. The new generation of historians, also Creoles and prominent actors in public life, studied the past from a different perspective: they believed that history could provide the clues for effective political action. For them, the past may help to correct or relieve the present world shaken by war. Consequently, the War of Independence was the most important event of their reflections, although they do not always address it directly.

For these historians, the past acquired a double significance, due to the significance of the War of Independence. On one hand, the colonial period was shown as something that was completely different from the present, despite their temporal proximity: the Civil War had destroyed all the old forms of social life, for better or for worse. On the other hand, it was only through the study of the past that it was possible to explain the new social reality and justify new forms of social and political coexistence. This tension between the lost colonial world and the new disastrous reality made it impossible to preserve the former, artificial connection between past (Indian) and present (Creole). It was necessary to find a new basis for national identity. However, they had to first solve the pressing issues raised by the permanent political crisis. In this way, all the ills that haunted the new nation were to be found in the past, therefore they discarded the symbolic identification to establish a causal connection between past and present. The past was now conceived in the category of experience: what has happened in the past explains the present and could provide tools for the future. Once again, this was a form of historical consciousness in the service of politics but now, the service of the past is not allegorical but concrete; it is supposed to solve specific social and political problems.

Consequently, to fully perform its new task, the new historical knowledge was designed to avoid the interpretative excesses of its predecessors. Despite all the ideological distortions or rhetorical extremes that we may find, all the authors of this period proceeded with extreme caution in handling their historical sources. Their statements always were based on documented 'facts', and it is remarkable how they

³⁸ Keen, *The Aztec Image*, 344. See also: Charles Hale, *El liberalismo mexicano en la época de Mora (1821-1853)*, translated by Sergio Fernández and Francisco González (México: Siglo XXI, 1984).

insisted in proclaiming the 'truth' of those facts and the 'sincerity' and 'righteousness' of their intentions. However, they were not producing historical 'science', rather they transformed historical 'truth' into a political device. The accurate historical research was intended to provide a justification for their political failures and support for their national projects.

This means that all the questions these authors addressed to the past were directed by the concerns of the present and, in most cases, they knew the answers beforehand. They did not write history to 'discover' what had happened but to confirm the viability of their own political intuitions. Their 'facts' were selected, sorted and interpreted to better serve political causes. We may find this utilisation of history in authors such as Lorenzo de Zavala (1788-1836), Lucas Alamán (1792-1853), José María Luis Mora (1794-1850), José María Tornel and Mendivil (1797-1853) and Luis Gonzaga Cuevas (1800-1867), to mention only the most prominent.

As I have said, none of these politician-historians felt the slightest identification with the pre-Hispanic past. For them, Mexico's history began with the Conquest, and true Mexicans were, or should be, Creoles or Europeans. The ancient Indians and their glorious past were merely ineffective and useless memories. The living Indians were a social problem to be solved, whether through education, miscegenation or disposal. For example, according to José María Luis Mora and Lucas Alamán, who represent the two extremes of the ideological spectrum, the pre-Hispanic world was a burden that should be abandoned. As a result, they regarded the Conquest in general as an advance for humanity but their reasons for this view were entirely different. For Mora, the quintessential Liberal, the ancient Indians were a relatively civilised people, but they developed a despotic, superstitious government, an enemy of progress and freedom. Therefore, for him, the Conquest was a breakthrough in the general history of human freedom. For his part, Alamán, the leading Conservative thinker, considered the Aztecs as a cultured people, almost refined, but bloodthirsty sinners. For that reason he regarded the Conquest as an act of divine justice, and as the crucible where two noble warrior races were merged. With this example I want to show how the ideological differences were transferred to the past, a process that conditioned each author's perspective. Although they drew different conclusions from history, their way of using the past remained the same: it was used to support practical and concrete policies in the present. Some examples are below.

In 1836, Mora published his *Mejico y sus revoluciones*.³⁹ The work is divided in two main sections: the first is devoted to describing the general situation of Mexico around 1830, and the second tells the history of Mexico from the Conquest to the first years of the War of Independence. Significantly, there is no section devoted to pre-Hispanic history. After a long narrative of the Conquest, Mora concludes as follows:

Thus was the great work of the conquest of Mexico that led to the colony of New Spain, which after the Revolution of Independence became the Mexican Republic. The name of Mexico is so closely linked to the memory of Cortes that while Mexico exists, Cortes will not die.⁴⁰

In sharp contrast with Mier and Bustamante, for Mora, the Mexican past was indissolubly bound to the Spanish past. This tie, however, was not enough to conceal that

³⁹ José María Luis Mora, *Méjico y sus revoluciones* (Paris: Librería de la Rosa, 1836).

⁴⁰ Mora, *Méjico y sus revoluciones*, t. III, 190. My translation.

almost all the problems of the new nation had their origin in the abusive and ineffective Spanish administration. This interpretation applies to every aspect of public life: education, public finances, government, society, etc. One particularly interesting example is Mora's view of the indigenous problem. He, like many other Liberals of the time, explained the Indians' disastrous conditions as a result of the paternalist Spanish legislation, which was intended to protect the Indians but, in reality, had reduced them to a state of perpetual childhood. His solution was the Republican system and the implementation of liberal laws that granted equality. However, Mora did not share Bustamante's optimism. For him laws would not have any immediate effect: they are only the first step in the solution of problems that have evolved over the centuries.⁴¹

According to Mora, since 1830, the plight of the nation was due to the incorrect implementation of Republican institutions, which were sound in themselves. The study of recent history was, in his view, the best way to identify the mistakes in application and correct them. His concept of the history of Mexico as a whole was that of a single process towards achieving freedom. Independence was, despite the undeniable damage that every revolution may produce, a necessary and blissful achievement. In the future, it may contribute to the higher causes of freedom and equality for all, and to the welfare and progress of the new nation. This was his overall view of the development of the history of Mexico, and it is within this idea that we must place his concept of the utility of the past. Indeed, for him the function of the past was to justify this optimistic view. In the conclusion of the first volume of *Mejico y sus revoluciones*, Mora wrote that the utility of historical writing was:

[...] to reveal what the real ills are, their true origins and the causes that produced them. Finally, history must show not only that those causes can disappear and lose their effectiveness, but that this has already partially happened. It must show that if the work is not yet completed, it has advanced much [...].⁴²

This optimistic view is almost opposite to one assumed by Alamán. However, he too regarded Cortes as the true father of the Mexican nation, and consequently for him the Conquest:

[...] created a new nation in which there is no trace of what existed before: religion, language, customs, laws, people, everything is a result of the Conquest which should not be judged by the transitory ills it caused, but by its permanent effects, by all the good things that it has produced and that will remain as long as the nation exists.⁴³

On this basis, Alamán worked incessantly to vindicate the Hispanic roots of the new nation. Like Mora, he also denied the influence of the Indian past. Unlike Mora, Alamán saw in the colonial past the origin of all the things that should be preserved: the moral and spiritual force of the Mexican people. This perspective gives a specifically conservative character to all his historical work. Alamán presented Spanish domination as an era of order, obedience, morality and decency in public affairs.

⁴¹ Mora, *México y sus revoluciones*, t. I, 187-207.

⁴² Mora, *México y sus revoluciones*, t. I, 531. My translation.

⁴³ Lucas Alamán, *Disertaciones sobre la historia de la República Mejicana* [1844] (Mexico, Editorial Jus, 1942), t. I, 120. My translation.

The colonial system worked perfectly, because of three centuries of political experience:

By these means [the respect for the monarch and the colonial administrative system], the whole immense continent of America, today a chaos of confusion, disorder and misery, was before in a constant and uniform movement, without violence, we can even say that without effort, walking in a progressive order to continuous and substantial improvements.⁴⁴

In his view, the colonial structure was so efficient that just the transformation of the viceregal system into an hereditary monarchy would have been enough to achieve independence.⁴⁵ For him, the independence movement was, in the beginning, only a product of the disagreements between Spaniards and Creoles. It could have been good, had it been limited to obtaining political and administrative autonomy, keeping intact the social structures and traditional lifestyles. Unfortunately, the movement was tinged with the colours of the “irreligious and anti-social philosophy of the eighteenth century”⁴⁶ and sought a complete change of institutions and social order. Once independence was an accomplished fact, and the Republican institutions were adopted, the damage was almost irreparable.

In his *Historia de Méjico* (1849-1852), Alamán takes stock of the conditions of the country after independence, comparing them with the final years of the colonial era. The result is devastating, only tempered by some notes of optimism concerning the moral and productive forces that still survived untouched by materialistic and liberal ideas. The situation was catastrophic, in practically all areas of public life, because all forms of government adopted since independence lacked true historical sustenance: they were the result of philosophical speculation and not of experience. His conclusion was clear: “the political institutions of this nation are not the ones it requires for its prosperity”.⁴⁷ The only possible way out was, in his view, to rescue the effective colonial institutions, adapting them to the new circumstances. This does not mean that Alamán sought a nostalgic return to the past: he was aware that the colonial world had been completely destroyed. For him, however, it was absolutely essential to recognise the weight of the past in shaping the cultural and social characteristics of the Mexican people. Failing in doing this would mean, for Alamán who writes this just after the United States invasion in 1847, the utter ruin and destruction of the Hispanic-American race.

It goes without saying that the colonial past that Alamán wished to recover had nothing to do with the Indian past. The national identity he supported had no place for the Indians, ancient or present. For him, the Indians were a privileged class in colonial times thanks to benign and protective Spanish legislation. He said very little about the Indians’ exploitation and misery, and nothing about what should be done to improve their conditions or to integrate them into the nation. His reformation plan simply does not include them. Finally, at the same point where Alamán explains his plans for the future, he also informs us about the utility of history:

Let us see which are the reasons that prevent us taking advantage of all the means of prosperity we have; let us examine the history of our mistakes to know the causes that have made

⁴⁴ Lucas Alamán, *Historia de Méjico* [1849-1852] (México: Imprenta de Victoriano Agüeros, 1883), t. I, 112. My translation.

⁴⁵ Alamán, *Historia de Méjico*, t. V, 686.

⁴⁶ Alamán, *Historia de Méjico*, t. V, 696.

⁴⁷ Alamán, *Historia de Méjico*, t. V, 699.

us commit them: let us benefit from the experience of the past, using its light to find a more successful path in the future. This by reforming the existing institutions, taking into account the good and convenient aspects they have, and changing everything that is impracticable, defective, weak or harmful, all that have been recognized as such during the last thirty years of repeated revolutions.⁴⁸

Despite the obvious ideological differences, Mora and Alamán shared a view of history as being valuable knowledge to shape the future. Both believed that only by paying attention to history would it be possible to avoid the dangers that threatened the existence of the new nation. It is a fact that many other Mexican intellectuals at that time shared this view, although their respective diagnoses and solutions were extremely diverse. They all used history as a way to justify their respective political programmes. In this particular sense, this form of historical consciousness was not unlike the one that preceded it. However, its scientific commitment was strongest, in the sense that historical knowledge was seen as a judicial debate. As a result, the authors of the historiographical works produced during this period (c. 1830-1870) utilised all the available historical conventions to present their ideological preferences as historical truths. In particular, they were fond of extensive documentary collections, which were often offered to the reader in the form of appendices. Those were the proofs for their theories. This compulsion to prove reveals that historiography was considered as one among many tools in the political debate. Once the country reached some political stability around 1880, and the political quarrels receded, this form of historical consciousness was substituted by a new one that explicitly denied all kind of political commitment.

7. THE PAST AS MEMORY. THE SCHOLAR HISTORIANS

From the mid-nineteenth century, it is possible to identify the beginnings of one of the most distinctive Mexican historiographical traditions. It started without any institutional support, as the work of individual historians. Today it is known as the erudite school.⁴⁹ Its members are little known outside Mexico: José Fernando Ramírez (1804-1871), Manuel Orozco y Berra (1816-1881), Joaquín García Icazbalceta (1825-1895), Antonio García Cubas (1832-1912), Alfredo Chavero (1841-1906), Francisco del Paso y Troncoso (1842-1916), among others. Unlike their predecessors, most of these intellectuals were not involved in politics, or only occupied minor administrative positions. Knowing that their political influence was very limited, they never stated programmes for social reformation, and rarely expressed their opinions on current public affairs. Also, they rejected both interpretations of Mexican history, the pro-Indian and the pro-Hispanic. In their view, these readings of the past were responsible for the strife and division among Mexicans. Finally, almost all their major works were published during Porfirio Díaz's regime (1876-1911), which for them represented the first period of stability after nearly 50 years of almost uninterrupted civil war. Consequently, they thought that history should contribute to political steadiness and not to political debate. Therefore, they avoided any reflection and analysis

⁴⁸ Alamán, *Historia de Méjico*, t. V, 704.

⁴⁹ Álvaro Matute, *Pensamiento historiográfico mexicano del siglo XX. La desintegración del positivismo (1911-1935)* (México: UNAM-FCE, 1999), 20.

of the convulsive immediate past, the source of all discord, and turned their attention to the scholarly study of pre-Hispanic and colonial Mexico.

These scholars saw national problems as the result of factional fighting, so they undertook the study of the past with the conviction that it should not be used as a political tool. Their studies were undertaken under the banner of pure and disinterested scientific research, for the love of truth. Obviously, these good wishes do not cancel out the potential ideological uses of history, they only became more subtle and, therefore, more effective. What they were actually practicing was a new form of politics. They were looking for understanding among the factions that had disputed the control of the country since independence. Therefore, they produced a new kind of national identity. With small differences, they all presented Mexico as a liberal, progressive, Catholic and traditional nation. In their view, Mexico, thanks to its Indian and Hispanic heritages, was a deserved protagonist of 'Universal History'. Thus, the Mexicans were not Indians or Spaniards or Creoles, but a new race, *mestizos*, a word that was not used as an insult anymore.⁵⁰ In fact, they were projecting into the national past all the attributes that the regime of Porfirio Díaz claimed for itself. However, this was not a Machiavellian manoeuvre. The promoters of this new Mexican historical memory were convinced of the historical necessity of the political regime they supported with their works.

In their own view, these historians were constructing what they considered to be the true national memory. Therefore, in their works we can identify a constant desire to rescue and preserve the past from oblivion and destruction. This aspiration was made visible by the publication of large documentary collections and in the creation of archaeological museums. This recovered past was supposed to promote a sense of unity and pride, not among a political party but for all Mexicans. In this way, these scholars also recovered the mythical and patriotic sense of the past once defended by the insurgency Creoles. Nevertheless, their appropriation of the Indian past was deprived of subversive implications because this past had been previously sterilised by the scientific methodology that guided their enquiries, at least in appearance. Thus, the past itself was understood as a shared recollection, a form of collective memory designed for reconciliation.

The preceding observations may apply, to different degrees, to each of the historians mentioned at the beginning of this section. However, in the case of Manuel Orozco y Berra they all apply completely.⁵¹ In his works we can find the purest example of this form of historical consciousness. His own public life is an example of the reconciliation spirit mentioned above. A scholar without personal wealth, he managed to survive almost 50 years working for virtually all the factions that once controlled the government during the second half of the nineteenth century. His low political profile allowed him to escape (almost always) from the political vengeance that often followed the establishment of each new regime. Even so, Orozco was haunted by misery all his life, which makes more remarkable his restless work in favour of national reconciliation through the production of a collective memory. This reconcilia-

⁵⁰ The best work on the concept and history of *mestizaje* in Mexico is Agustín Basave, *México mestizo. Análisis del nacionalismo mexicano en torno a la mestizofilia* (México: FCE, 1992).

⁵¹ See Rodrigo Díaz-Maldonado, *Manuel Orozco y Berra o la historia como reconciliación de los opuestos* (México: UNAM, 2010).

tory spirit also explains why his work usually combines opposing ideas, from political liberalism to social conservatism, from evolution theory to creationism, and so on. His diplomatic historiography was designed to give each one his due. Actually, Orozco carried this desire for reconciliation even to the methodological level. As a result, he often offers interpretations as fantastical as the ones produced by Mier. The difference is that Orozco always presented every polemical interpretation in the form of a scientific debate, with no connection whatsoever with his present circumstances.

Orozco's most important work was the *Historia Antigua y de la conquista de México*, published between 1880 and 1881.⁵² At the time of its publication, this work was considered as the most perfect example of historical research and the best synthesis ever written of Mexican history. In it, Orozco presents the Aztec society as a highly moral one (at least more than the ancient Greeks and their taste for sexually ambiguous divinities), inflexibly righteous (more than the corrupted Romans) and, in the end, better than many other ancient or modern societies.⁵³ The problems with the Aztecs were their despotic government, which was an enemy of progress, and their superstitious religion. This view is almost a synthesis of the liberal and conservative readings of pre-Hispanic history. It also implies an amalgamation of the secular idea of 'Progress' with the religious notion of 'Providence'. In effect, for Orozco, the progress of societies is a natural law, but it is a law imposed by the Divine Providence. The result is a concoction: all the peoples in the world ought to progress because that is what God commands. If they do not, they will succumb naturally to the onslaught of more advanced peoples. Therefore, for Orozco, the Conquest of Mexico was neither a divine punishment nor something entirely determined by material or natural conditions. It was the result of what he calls "the providential law", an expression that summarises his desire for reconciliation.⁵⁴ In the end, the Conquest of Mexico was the cause of significant suffering among one people, but that suffering was almost nothing when compared to the benefits that it produced for all humans:

The human family was divided into two separated factions, unknown to each other, without communication or treatment. They had grown and developed, walking different paths to the final end of progress. The Conquest fused these factions into one single unity, thus producing unity in plurality, and making one body of mankind, forcing all to follow the same path to the indefinitely, never infinite, perfection.⁵⁵

With this interpretation of the Conquest, Orozco was trying to eliminate the political use of one part of the past by transforming it into a collective heritage. Thus, he was also transferring his aversion for political divisions into the entire history of Mexico. For him, all the divisions and misfortunes of Mexican history would be transcended by a final reconciliation. This optimistic form of historical consciousness integrates the past into the present as a shared memory that belongs to everyone. This means that everyone, all the different factions, should be remembered because, in the end, all were parts of one single national unity. In addition, this means that no one has any

⁵² Manuel Orozco y Berra, *Historia Antigua y de la conquista de México* [1880-1881] introduction by Ángel María Garibay, biography and bibliography of the author by Miguel León-Portilla (México: Editorial Porrúa, 1960).

⁵³ There are many examples of this throughout his work, see: Orozco y Berra, *Historia Antigua*, t. I, 111, 117, 196, 308.

⁵⁴ Orozco y Berra, *Historia Antigua*, t. IV, 83.

⁵⁵ Orozco y Berra, *Historia Antigua*, t. IV, 578.

particular claim over this common past. With this, Orozco and his generation sought to domesticate the political potential of the past which, in the end, becomes a pure object of contemplation; an object without real capacity to endanger the stability of the eternal present that they desired.

8. CONCLUSION

Along with the apogee of the Erudite School during the Porfiriato regime, Positivism gained popularity until it became virtually the official philosophy of the regime.⁵⁶ Inspired by Comte and Spencer, the Mexican positivists attempted to restore the practical dimension of historical knowledge. However, they did not challenge the reconciliation discourse of the preceding form of historical consciousness. Actually, the positivists only added the vocabulary and the external appearance of a social science. Of course, these changes were not merely cosmetic, but the result of a complex process of adaptation to the new social circumstances produced by the accelerated economic transformation initiated during the Porfiriato era. After 30 years of a continuous and hitherto unknown process of modernisation, the traditional forms of social coexistence were radically altered or destroyed. This produced a complete range of new social problems for which the positivists tried to find solutions, peaceful rather than radical. Almost until the end of the regime in 1911, the positivists, as with their predecessors, were trying to justify and preserve the status quo by showing its historical necessity. Unlike their predecessors, however, the positivists believed in the gradual development of society by the application of scientific knowledge. Thus, the discovery of the laws of society was initiated under the influence of two ideals: the conservation of political and social order, and the enhancement of material and economic conditions by technological means. Both ideas were expressed by the positivist motto of "Freedom, order and progress". However, the dream of a peaceful, liberal, and prosperous future was utterly destroyed by the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920). Over time, this new social uprising produced a new form of historical consciousness and a new national identity. Once again, its production was due a complex and subtle reworking of elements already present in the Mexican historiographical tradition. In this way, the foundation myth of the Mexican Revolution combined the Indian past, the idea of a *mestizo* nation, and the ideas of freedom and progress within the new ideal of social justice. The Hispanic and Creole traditions were rejected and regarded as the ideological background of the Revolution's foes. All this, however, corresponds to the subject of another article.

The three modalities of historical consciousness I have presented here are a first attempt to systematise many scattered elements along the Mexican intellectual history of the nineteenth century. The degree of interaction between politics and historiography, abundantly studied in other contexts, is not yet completely clear in the case of Mexico. This clarification work should include two main directions: first, a more precise explanation of the transitions between these modalities is needed, which I

⁵⁶ For Mexican positivism see: Leopoldo Zea, *El positivismo en México. Nacimiento, apogeo y decadencia* (México: FCE, 2^o edition 1968); and William Dirk Raat, *El positivismo durante el porfiriato (1876-1910)*, translated by Andres Lira (México: SEP, 1975). These books are until today the most important works on the subject.

present here only superficially. That is, it is important to show exactly how historical representations were stimulated by the current political debates present in journals, public speeches, parliamentary proceedings and so on. Second, it is also important to illustrate the inverse process, *i.e.*, how the different products of historical consciousness (such as the variable national identities) were transformed into specific legislation, public policies, social programmes, etc.⁵⁷ Of course, this work should to be done without forgetting the internal dimension of historiography. Further analysis may show the complexity of the inner contact between these different forms of historical consciousness. Mexican historiography is radically different from its European counterpart at least in one aspect: more than different schools, clearly divided by ideological or epistemological conventions, in Mexico, we found the constant reworking of a handful of recurring themes. These themes were treated according to new scientific conventions, imported from Europe in many cases. Nevertheless, what gives Mexican historiography its own character are these constant concerns, not their external appearance. If we follow the changes, contacts and continuities between the recurrent topics, patterns and concerns in Mexican historiography, we will find it much more a highly original intellectual development rather than a bizarre appropriation of European culture.

One last observation is this. Currently in Mexico it is possible to distinguish the same processes of appropriation and reworking of the past to support specific political projects. This is quite normal, in my view. What is remarkable is the persistence of almost the same discursive elements used in the nineteenth century to produce a national identity. The names may have changed (the Indians are not Indians, but native or original peoples), as well as the media (mass media and social networking rather than academic historiography), but the ingredients of the Mexican 'we', the background of almost all political debates, are still the same. This perseverance is, in my opinion, quite eloquent about the necessity of studying the discursive formation and political uses of national identity in Mexico, even when the notion of national identity itself is no longer the centre of academic discussions in other contexts.

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⁵⁷ A conceptual framework for these operations has been advanced by Aleida Assmann. See, for example, Aleida Assmann, "Transformations between History and Memory", *Social Research* 74, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 49-72.