

The Factor of "Race" in the French Experience in Mexico, 1821-1861

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To read nineteenth-century French literature on the Americas, especially on Mexico and Mexicans, is to enter a world peopled with racial stereotypes. European observers of events on the North American continent, whether they were diplomats, men of letters, scientists, merchants, or simple travelers, wrote in terms of race and unhesitatingly indulged in judgments that would today earn them opprobrium in all but the most blatantly racist circles.¹ No one doubted that races possessed intrinsic qualities that distinguished them from each other. Some were innately strong, others weak; some were hopelessly corrupt and degraded, others were progressive and energetic. These were truisms to be repeated, not hypotheses to be tested. The *bien pensants* (men of "correct" views) saw no need to qualify their pronouncements. They could vent their views on *les races latines*, the Spanish "race," the Mexican "race," or the "Anglo-American race" unselfconsciously and unblushingly, serene in the knowledge that they would win ready acceptance by all who read them.

The basic premise of such writing was the assumed superiority of Europeans over inhabitants of the New World, and as such it flowed from a deeply rooted historic tradition. The Mexican, however, was held to be a uniquely unfortunate specimen of that part of the globe with defects peculiar to his nationality. He was seen as childlike and as possessing those faults arising from immaturity and weakness. "Mexicans are like women and children," observed a French captain of a ship in the gulf station of Pensacola in the 1840s. "They do not be-

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1. The research for this article is part of that undertaken for a book-length manuscript entitled "The French Experience in Mexico, 1821-1861: A History of Constant Misunderstanding" to be published by the University of North Carolina Press. It is based on, among other things, the diplomatic and commercial correspondence concerning Mexico and Texas for those years in the Archives du Ministère des Affaires Etrangères, Paris (hereafter cited as AMAE) and wide reading of French newspapers, travel accounts, memoirs, and historical essays.

lieve in danger until it is upon them; meanwhile it is all boasting and bickering."² A few years earlier the French minister plenipotentiary in Mexico had pronounced: "Mexicans . . . are as fickle and improvident as children. No European power has yet given them a lesson; and they conclude that they will never receive one."³ But at the same time Mexicans were thought to have a more than generous share of adult faults: corruption, vanity, cowardice, and decadence. Everyone could agree that they were incapable of governing themselves. Bemoaning the anarchical situation in Mexico in the 1830s, the French minister reported: "If ever it should happen that one man . . . should establish his authority here I believe that we should adopt a system of negotiation with him appropriate to the excessive vanity and spirit of intrigue which are in the National character. But I presume this man is yet to be born."⁴

Such pronouncements were so common that even as early as 1831 when France was preparing to send out her first diplomatic representative to the recently recognized Mexican republic, the French foreign minister thought he knew in advance those traits of Mexican character that would impede French diplomacy. "He [the Mexican] has the habits of delay and procrastination, a mind given to subtlety and chicanery [and] a tendency to contest even the most justifiable claims," he warned his departing agent. "[He possesses] that sort of skill that consists in evading the best phrased questions in order to avoid their consequences."⁵ By mid-century the editors of the *Annuaire des deux mondes*, a compendium of *bien pensant* opinion, could assert:

There are races which . . . seem fatally dedicated to total incurable convulsions. They are constantly in motion but they make no progress; their revolutions never end, their moments of truce are short and sterile. Beneath this chronic disorder is taking place a gigantic process of decomposition accelerated by each crisis. Such is the deplorable history of the Hispanic American world between the Rio-Bravo del Norte, separating Mexico from the United States and Cape Horn.⁶

2. Commandant Regnard to French Minister of Navy, aboard the *Brillante* at Pensacola, Aug. 29, 1844, AMAE, Correspondance Politique (hereafter cited as CP): Mexique, vol. 28, fols. 171-172.

3. Baron Antoine Deffaudis to Achille, Duke of Broglie, Mexico, Feb. 3, 1836, AMAE, CP: Mexique, vol. 10, no. 77, fols. 20-23.

4. Deffaudis to Adolphe Thiers, Mexico, July 23, 1836, AMAE, CP: Mexique, vol. 10, no. 94, fols. 113-116.

5. French Foreign Minister to Baron Jean-Baptiste Gros, Paris, draft, Oct. 6, 1831, AMAE, Mémoires et Documents: Amérique, vol. 41, fols. 214-251.

6. *Annuaire des deux mondes*, 4 (1853-1854), 772.

Mexicans ruefully recognized and confirmed the generality of their reputation in France. “We are regarded here [Paris] as a sorry people,” wrote the Mexican representative in Paris in 1856, “objects either of scorn or pity; who, incapable of governing ourselves and verging on social dissolution, require the hand of a foreigner, and a *strong hand* to escape from our condition of prostration.”⁷

Yet if writers indulged freely in racial rhetoric, they were neither clear nor consistent in what they perceived as a race. Definitions and classifications of race varied enormously. Dictionaries served to compound the confusion. In English, French, and Spanish, the word may refer to any people descended from a common ancestor: a family, a tribe, a nation. The word was (and still is) used, for example, in connection with French ruling dynasties, the Merovingians, Carolingians, and Capetians being identified as the first, second and third “races” of French rulers.⁸ The young Prince of Joinville, son of King Louis Philippe, was thinking of the word in that sense when, as captain of a corvette off Veracruz in 1838, he yearned to be in the thick of the fighting that he might “uphold the honor of his race.”⁹ The word may also refer to divisions of mankind based on anatomical or physiological classification: the races of mankind. Or it may mean a breed or strain of nonhuman animal, or even a constant variety of a plant. Moreover, French speakers use the word familiarly and metaphorically in expressions like *race des usuriers*, *race des pédants*, or even *méchante petite race!*

This ambiguity engendered a variety of explanations for Mexican inferiority. Some blamed “blood,” that is, anatomical or physiological inheritance, for their deficiencies. Others fixed upon cultural defects deriving from a regrettable Spanish legacy compounded by geographical isolation. Both themes were highly elastic and subject to imaginative improvisation.

Proponents of the biological thesis frequently saw the Mexicans as the blood descendants of the Spaniards. They carried in their veins all the alleged defects of their former conquerors. The French minister

7. Francisco Modesto Olaguibel to Luis de la Rosa, reservado, Paris, June 30, 1856, in Luis Weckmann, ed., *Las relaciones franco-mexicanas, 1823-1867*, 2 vols. (México, 1961), II, 179, no. 13766.

8. For example, see the “Chronologie des principaux souverains de France,” in Jacques Hillairet, ed., *Dictionnaire historique des rues de Paris* (Paris, 1961), p. 8.

9. François Ferdinand Philippe Louis Marie d’Orléans, Prince de Joinville, *Vieux souvenirs, 1818-1848* (Paris, 1894), pp. 147, 155-157. For a good discussion of the problems of defining race, see Magnus Mörner, *Race Mixture in the History of Latin America* (Boston, 1967), pp. 3-5.

in Mexico in the 1850s, Viscount Jean Aléxis Gabriac, for example, saw the race of Spanish “offspring” in the New World as the “worst on the Globe.” And of the peoples constituting that race, he added a few months later, “the Mexicans . . . [were] the most despicable of all.”¹⁰ Another French observer of like mind was an officer on the French flagship off Veracruz during the bombardment of 1838 who could not but lament the fate “of the unfortunate Spanish race [in Mexico], a decadent, rotten race that flounders about in the two Americas incapable of emerging from disorder and misery despite all its chances for liberty and wealth.”¹¹ About the same time the French agent in Texas, Alphonse Dubois de Saligny, remarking on the expansion of the “Anglo-Americans” in the area, concluded: “this wretched Spanish race in Mexico, brutish, degraded, exhausted physically and morally by its own corruption, is doomed to lose this magnificent God-given country whose great resources it failed to develop.”¹²

Other believers in the biological thesis were either less sure of the racial inheritance of the Mexicans or spoke of Mexicans as two distinct races—the Indian and the creole. Sometimes a third, the mestizo, was added. The French minister in Mexico in the 1830s, Baron Isidore Elizabeth Jean Baptiste Alleye de Cyprey, for example, explained Mexican vanity and cowardice as arising from the inferior “blood.” “Like the Arabs [also inferior],” he wrote, “they submit when addressed with the authority of force and become humble and supplicating.”¹³ But he was uncertain from whence this bad blood flowed. “Mexico is not a nation,” he reported on another occasion, “it is a mixture of races devoid of the meaning of national sentiment.”¹⁴ A French traveler who declared he had journeyed throughout the land emphasized the prevalence of the Indian “race” that was “gentle, intelligent, hospitable, and easy to govern,” although it was at the same time “apathetic, indolent, and purposeless.” With the introduction of European blood, he con-

10. Viscount Jean Gabriac to Count Alexandre Joseph Walewski, Mexico, Jan. 25, 1857, AMAE, CP: Mexique, vol. 46, no. 175.

11. Eugène Maissin, *The French in Mexico and Texas (1838–1839)*, trans. and ed. by James L. Shepherd III (Salado, Texas, 1961), p. 233.

12. Alphonse Dubois de Saligny to Maréchal Soult, Duke of Dalmatia, New York, June 24, 1839, AMAE, CP: Texas, vol. 1, no. 10, reproduced in English translation in Nancy Nichols Barker, ed. and trans., *The French Legation in Texas*, 2 vols. (Austin, 1971–1973), I, 102. Dubois de Saligny had just completed a mission of investigation of Texas for the French government and was on his way back to Paris.

13. Baron Isidore Elizabeth Alleye de Cyprey to François Guizot, Mexico, June 20, 1843, AMAE, CP: Mexique, vol. 24, no. 168, fols. 124–129.

14. Alleye de Cyprey to Thiers, Mexico, July 27, 1840, AMAE, CP: Mexique, vol. 19, no. 13, fol. 115.

cluded, the country could become a "true Eldorado."¹⁵ For Mathieu de Fossey, on the other hand, a Frenchman who resided some twenty-five years in Mexico, it was the *léperos* (derelicts of Mexican society), not the Indians in general, who constituted a group apart. In order to refute a charge made by a compatriot that all Mexicans stole, he explained that only *léperos* were thieves par excellence.¹⁶

Not infrequently one finds emphasis on the differences between the Indian and creole "races" as in the following disquisition by a French commercial agent in Mexico in 1829:

The [Mexican creole] officer is a strutting peacock in peace and a coward in combat. The sober and patient soldier could show some quality if he were better led but, a pillager by nature, he sees service in arms only as a means of stealing with impunity. . . . The Indian shows on his face the mark of his former servitude. He is docile and timid. He offered no resistance to the Spanish conquest. . . . The Mexican creole is vain of his origins. . . . He adores distinctions and honors. . . . His indolent habits, his depraved tastes, and his habitual vices prevent him from comprehending ideas of independence, liberty, and equality."¹⁷

The biological thesis of Mexican inferiority had as its inevitable corollary the evident superiority of the encroaching Anglo-Americans, who were allegedly as vigorous and virile as the Mexicans were indolent and epicene. The rapid expansion of the Americans into the West at the expense of the Mexican republic was a constant source of amazement and alarm. The young Dubois de Saligny, reconnoitering the Republic of Texas in 1839, was both horrified and dazzled by the energetic "Texians" who were making a civilization in a desert. "What a race!" he exclaimed. "What can the Mexicans do against men of this kidney."¹⁸ And again in a later report: "Sooner or later this race [the Mexican] will disappear before the onrush of . . . the Texians who will [with their civilization] extend to Mexico . . . and

15. A. Guérout to Guizot, Mazatlán, May 24, 1843, AMAE, CP: Mexique, vol. 24, fols. 81–96.

16. Mathieu de Fossey, *Le Mexique* (Paris, 1857), p. 252.

17. Adrien Cochelet to French Foreign Minister, Mexico, Sept. 19, 1829, AMAE, CP: Mexique, vol. 4, no. 28. Cochelet's entire correspondence is permeated with such sentiments. British and Spanish diplomats held similar views. For a summarization see Barker, "Monarchy in Mexico: Harebrained Scheme or Well-Considered Prospect?" *Journal of Modern History*, 48 (Mar. 1976), 51–68; and Barker, "Voyageurs français au Mexique, fourriers de l'intervention (1830–1860)," *Revue d'Histoire Diplomatique*, nos. 1–2 (Jan.–June 1973), 1–19.

18. Dubois de Saligny to Count Louis Mathieu Molé, Houston, Mar. 16, 1839, AMAE, CP: Texas, vol. 1; Barker, ed., *The French Legation in Texas*, I, 69.

ultimately carry beyond the Isthmus of Panama.”¹⁹ It soon became a truism that Mexico, if left to its own devices, would disappear entirely from the globe. At mid-century, the editors of the *Annuaire des deux mondes* pronounced: “From year to year is measured the progress of a bold race [the Anglo-American] which seems never to have enough of its immense spaces. The United States is preparing Mexico for its dissolution and no longer even tries to disguise its designs over these vast provinces.”²⁰

Proponents of the cultural inferiority of the Mexicans tended to find its origin in centuries of Spanish misrule. According to this hypothesis, a long line of Spanish officials had bequeathed to the Mexicans all the deplorable habits and vices that had led to the Spanish descent from glory in modern times. Mexicans, therefore, tended to behave exactly like Spaniards. When the French foreign minister in 1831 had forewarned his agent of the difficulties he would encounter in negotiating with the Mexicans, he had advised: “the system of conduct to follow in Mexico should differ little from that which experience has shown is best in Spain. Indeed, people, government, administration, everything in the two countries is the same as to their customs, character, practices, and prejudices.”²¹ Mexico, then, had acquired from Spain her notorious religious bigotry, her resistance to modern progress, and her penchant for corruption. The first French minister plenipotentiary in Mexico, Baron Antoine Deffaudis, thoroughly agreed with the ideas of the foreign minister. “The education that this wretched people has received,” he reported, “is so detestable . . . that they lack the most elementary concepts of law and justice.”²² Like the Spaniards, the Mexicans were doomed to languish in a perpetual state of ignorance and medieval backwardness.

These biological and cultural explanations of Mexican inferiority laid stress on the differences between the French and Mexican peoples. Yet another racial hypothesis emphasized their similarities. This was the belief in the collective unity of peoples labeled *les races latines*. According to this doctrine the Mexicans were members of a branch of western civilization that had its center in the peoples of western and southern Europe. It extended to all areas of the globe

19. Dubois de Saligny to Dalmatia, New York, June 24, 1839, *ibid.*, no. 10, I, 102.

20. *Annuaire des deux mondes*, 5 (1854–1855), 747.

21. French Foreign Minister to Gros, Paris, Oct. 6, 1831, draft, AMAE, Mémoires et Documents: Amérique, vol. 41, fols. 214–251.

22. Deffaudis to Molé, Mexico, Nov. 25, 1837, AMAE, CP: Mexique, vol. 12, no. 164, fols. 41–44.

that at some time in the past had fallen under their domination. The French, the Italians, the Portuguese, the Spanish, and their *rejetons* (offspring) overseas were thus brothers in a select fraternity. Bound by ties primarily of religion (Roman Catholic) and secondarily of language (romance), they responded to the same stimuli and required the same governance. Under the influence of this afflatus the experts could ignore demographic and historical realities. The French and the Mexicans could be seen as sharing the same heritage and therefore, presumably, the same destiny.

No one, of course, believed that the member nations were equal. The colonies overseas must look to the lights of Europe for guidance. And there shining most brightly among the Latin nations of Europe was the lamp of France, who had taken over from Spain the role of guide and mentor. "Without putting anyone down," wrote Michel Chevalier, the Emperor Napoleon III's most articulate exponent of the doctrine of *les races latines*, "one can say that France is the soul, . . . the spirit [and] . . . the force [of the Latin races]. Without her, without her enterprising initiative, and without the respect that her enlightenment, her elevated principles, and her military might commands, the group of latin nations would cut but a poor figure in the world. . . ."²³

This doctrine thus could be one of hope. If Mexicans were backward today, they need not be tomorrow. At bottom, it seemed to suggest, the Mexican "race," owing to its Latin heritage, was sound. It had within it the stuff of greatness. Under the leadership of the big Latin brother, Mexico could find its Latin roots and consolidate its nationhood.

If the myth of *les races latines* contradicted, at least in part, other current hypotheses of the rottenness of Mexicans, it appeared to bother no one. The ignorance of things Mexican was so great and the racial jargon so loose that inconsistencies passed unnoticed. The Spanish-born Empress Eugénie, wife of Napoleon III, for example, believed herself an expert on Mexicans because she thought of them (sometimes) as Spaniards. Advising the newly enthroned Emperor Maximilian and his wife Charlotte on the proper governance of Mexico she wrote: "I tell Your Majesties this, because I know that race [Mex-

23. Michel Chevalier, *Le Mexique ancien et moderne* (Paris, 1864), p. 495. For a recent discussion of the French concept of the "Latin race," see John L. Phelan, "Pan-Latinism, French Intervention in Mexico (1861-1867) and the Genesis of the Idea of Latin America," in Juan Antonio Ortega y Medina, ed., *Conciencia y autenticidad históricas* (México, 1968), pp. 279-298.

ican], which at bottom is the same as the Spanish race.”²⁴ And if the Mexicans were the same as Spaniards then in her book they must be Latins. She lectured: “the adage which says that what is needed is the iron hand in the velvet glove was never more applicable than in the case of peoples of Latin race, and especially Mexico.”²⁵ Yet on the same day in another letter, also to Charlotte, she could write of Mexicans as “poor Indians” who would owe their regeneration to their European sovereigns.²⁶ On other occasions as well she viewed Mexicans as distinct from Europeans. Bemoaning the difficulties encountered by French troops in pacifying the Mexican hinterland in 1865, she observed that Cortés had conquered the Indians with only a handful of followers. Why, she asked, were so many necessary now?²⁷

The rhetoric of race, confused though it was, inevitably left its mark on French policies toward Mexico. Twice during the nineteenth century France deployed force against Mexico: once in the reign of Louis Philippe in the blockade and bombardment of Veracruz in 1838–1839 and again in the 1860s under Napoleon III in the invasion of the interior by a French army in an attempt to establish Archduke Ferdinand Maximilian on a Mexican throne. In both cases the factor of race may be seen as conditioning the minds of the decision-makers and preparing them to act.

When the government of Louis Philippe dispatched a naval squadron to Veracruz in the 1830s it was in a sense acting gratuitously. It is true that France had legitimate cause to complain of the treatment accorded French residents and French commerce by the Mexican government. But neither her economic nor political interests in Mexico were sufficient to necessitate or to justify such action. French monetary claims even as inflated by the French legation in Mexico amounted to a mere \$600,000. The Mexicans, ridiculing the French overreaction, dubbed the attack the “Pastry War” in honor of one of the French claimants, a pastry cook, whose small shop had been plundered by Mexican soldiers. French investments in and commerce with Mexico were too small to make a ripple on her economy as a whole,

24. Eugénie to Charlotte, Tuileries, Apr. 1, 1865, reproduced in English translation in Egon Caesar Count Corti, *Maximilian and Charlotte of Mexico*, trans. by Catherine Alison Phillips, 2 vols. (New York, 1928), II, 895.

25. Same to same, July 30, 1864, *ibid.*, p. 844.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 843.

27. General Edmond-Aimable l’Hérillier to Charlotte, Douai, Nov. 27, 1865, Hausarchiv Kaiser Maximilians von Mexico, in Corti, *Maximilian and Charlotte*, II, 550.

and her complaints attracted little or no attention at home.²⁸ The slowness (and sometimes outright refusal) of the Mexican government to pay damages to French subjects with grievances could have been tolerated or somehow negotiated as they had been in the past. Neither Louis Philippe nor his foreign minister, Count Louis Molé, had any ulterior aims in Mexico. They neither intended to invade the interior nor entertained visions of a monarchical solution to Mexico's chronic civil wars.²⁹

But why would the July Monarchy, passive to the point of pusillanimity according to its enemies, involve itself in so costly an adventure for so paltry a purpose? While the solution to this riddle cannot be given in its entirety here, a large part of it may be found in the blow dealt to French *amour propre* by a people thought to be an inferior breed. When the Mexican government rejected French demands for compensation of her subjects, the official response of Foreign Minister Molé was an outburst of French racial prejudice. "Mexico is still a barbaric country imbued with the spite of old Spain against Foreigners. . . [and] jealous of their industrial superiority," he wrote in a position paper arguing the need for deployment of force. Europeans who brought to Mexico their "civilizing industry," he continued, were "harrassed, ransomed, pillaged, [and] assassinated as if they were outlaws." Mexico was comparable to Europe of the Middle Ages. It was constantly "prey to civil wars" and "devoid of financial organization." Foreigners who lived on its territory were *taillable et corvéable à merci*. They were like the medieval Jews, he pronounced, "who alone set an example of commerce and productive activity in the midst of an ignorant and barbaric society." When such a people declined to acquiesce to French demands, the blow to French pride was much heavier than would have been the case if dealt by a European power. "France," he concluded, "finds it beneath her dignity to return to a negotiation that has already exposed to all the irrationality

28. In 1836, for example, the value of French exports to Mexico amounted to less than one percent of the value of her exports to all other countries. See *Statistique de la France: Commerce extérieur* (Paris, 1838).

29. There is never the slightest hint of a desire to introduce a monarchy or to go beyond the limits of the demands (for an indemnity and protection of French subjects and trade in Mexico) submitted to the Mexican government in any of the archives of AMAE or in the public statements of the king and Foreign Minister Molé. See also Marquis de Noailles, ed., *Le Comte Molé, 1781-1855, sa vie—ses mémoires*, 6 vols. (Paris, 1922-1930), VI, 38-39; Joinville, *Vieux souvenirs*, p. 149; Jurien de la Gravière, *Les gloires maritimes de la France: L'Amiral Baudin* (Paris, 1888), pp. 118-119. Not a single soldier was sent to Mexico with the naval expeditions of 1838-1839.

and perfidy of the men directing the affairs of Mexico.” Force was the only proper reply.³⁰

The belief in Mexican inferiority made the French all the readier to dispatch their ships, and they anticipated an easy victory. For years the French minister plenipotentiary in Mexico had been assuring his superiors in Paris that a single warship would need less than an hour to demolish the fortress of San Juan de Ulúa guarding Veracruz and to bring Mexico to its knees.³¹ The French minister of the navy was not quite so naive. But he and his colleagues grossly underestimated the quality of Mexican resistance and believed that a blockade or an attack on Veracruz would force the government to capitulate.

The French had a sad lesson in store for them. Confident that Mexico would yield at the very sight of the French vessels, the government initially sent out a squadron of seven warships. To its dismay it discovered not only that the Mexican government remained unimpressed, but that the squadron was unable to establish a blockade or to attack San Juan de Ulúa. Recalling its fever-decimated remnants, the government then assembled a fleet of nearly twenty ships that included three frigates, two mortar ships, and two steamers.³² But even this force, although it laid down a blockade and captured the fortress, was unable to bring Mexico to heel. Mexico agreed to pay an indemnity but refused either to negotiate a commercial treaty or to honor French claims in the future.³³ Reporting this inadequate satisfaction to Paris, Admiral Charles Baudin, commander of the expedition, explained: “We have done all we can [after reducing the fortress and spiking the guns of Veracruz] to hurt the enemy short of launching on a ruinous war [that is, an armed invasion of the in-

30. Memorandum, Nov. 19, 1836, AMAE, CP: Mexique, vol. 10, fols. 231–232; Molé to Deffaudis, Paris, draft, Nov. 7, 1836, AMAE, CP: Mexique, vol. 10, no. 31, fols. 213–216. See also the speech in favor of using force in Mexico by Dr. Gabriel Prunelle in the Chamber of Deputies, Mar. 11, 1837, *Archives parlementaires*, CVIII, 307. A chronological account of the expedition is given by William Spence Robertson, “French Intervention in 1838,” *HAHR*, 24 (May 1944), 222–252.

31. Deffaudis to Molé, Mexico, Mar. 29, June 18, June 25, 1837, AMAE, CP: Mexique, vol. 11, nos. 130, 142, 144.

32. See the official list of ships as of Jan. 3, 1839, in P. Blanchard and A. Dautats, *San Juan de Ulúa* [sic], *ou relation de l'expédition française au Mexique, sous les ordres de M. le contre-amiral Baudin* (Paris, 1839), p. 349; Jurien de la Gravière, *Baudin*, passim.

33. *Tratados y convenciones concluidos y ratificados por la República Mexicana desde su independencia hasta el año actual, acompañados de varios documentos que les son referentes* (México, 1878), pp. 415–423; for the correspondence accompanying the negotiations, see Antonio de la Peña y Reyes, ed., *La primera guerra entre México y Francia* (México 1927), XXIII, 337–343.

terior].”³⁴ The French were obliged to retire with what dignity they could muster. They had learned the hard fact that Mexico, protected by its rugged mountain ranges, was like a turtle in its shell. The French could hammer on its exterior as long as they liked without delivering the mortal blow. In a moment of candor the French foreign minister later wrote: “Our experience in the use of force against Mexico, it must be admitted, is one that we would not wish to repeat.”³⁵

Louis Napoleon had no intention of repeating it when he launched his Mexican venture over twenty years later. If his predecessor had attempted to punish Mexico, he desired instead to regenerate it. The emperor had understood that gunboat diplomacy was in fact harmful to French interests in Mexico. A blockade of the ports disrupted trade and commerce, which was the lifeline of the French colony of merchants and craftsmen.³⁶ Depriving Mexico of its customs revenues forced its government to levy taxes on foreign capital to stave off bankruptcy. The heightened political instability pushed the country to the verge of anarchy in which its productive energies were dissipated. And the very presence of the French warships aroused popular hostility to foreigners and imperiled the lives and property of French residents in the country. Napoleon III realized that the French in Mexico could flourish only if Mexico itself were peaceful and productive. In order to promote French interests in Mexico, the emperor must end the civil disorder within Mexico and consolidate its nationhood. This was the practical reasoning behind the Mexican expedition of 1862–1867. Chevalier, spokesman for the emperor, explained the French purpose as follows: “Instead of desiring to weaken Mexico or to dismember it, as the United States has done in each of its wars, France has but one goal: to save this beautiful land from imminent ruin, to rescue its civilization from almost total decay, and to establish in Mexico, with the willing assistance of the Mexicans, a flourishing State that will govern itself in full independence.”³⁷

34. Baudin to Molé, aboard the *Néréide*, Dec. 15, 1838, AMAE, CP: Mexique, vol. 15, fols. 75–76.

35. Dalmatia to Alleye de Cyprey, draft, Paris, Oct. 31, 1839, AMAE, CP: Mexique, vol. 18, no. 1, fols. 22–47.

36. For a description and analysis of the composition, activities, and attitudes of the French residents in Mexico and their influence on French policy, see Barker, “The French Colony in Mexico, 1821–1861: Generator of Intervention,” *French Historical Studies*, 9 (Fall 1976), 596–618.

37. Chevalier, *Le Mexique*, pp. 479–480. The volume of scholarly literature on the Maximilian affair is, of course, enormous and also tendentious. Martín Quirarte has devoted an entire volume to an analysis of the major publications on the subject without so much as touching on periodical material: *Historiografía sobre el imperio de Maximiliano* (México, 1970). The most thorough treatment of

Yet this statement of purpose is by no means adequate to describe the broader meaning and ultimate goals of the emperor's Mexican policy, which an admiring minister once called "the great idea of the reign" (*la grande pensée du règne*). In this broader framework, the Mexican expedition was to be a means not only to regenerate the Mexicans but to revitalize and extend the declining forces of the Latin peoples everywhere. If they were to count in the world, they too must build economic empires and modernize their economies. By reorganizing Mexican society, the emperor planned to release its productive energies and tap its vast reservoirs of wealth. It would become the focus of Latin culture and economic activity in the New World. Strong in its new nationhood it could form a barrier against the encroachments of the Anglo-Americans and reestablish a balance of power on the North American continent. There the emperor would check both the seemingly relentless erosion of Catholic influence across the globe and mount an offensive against the growing ascendance of Protestant and other non-Catholic nations. Those men "capable of serious reflection," wrote Chevalier, would recognize that "the destinies of France and the force of her authority" were wrapped up "in the fate of Catholic states in general and the Latin races in particular." He concluded: "That is the most powerful argument it is possible to make in support of the Mexican expedition."³⁸

It is easily perceived, then, that the *grande pensée* was synonymous with the doctrine of *les races latines*. Mexico was worthy of regeneration because of its Latin roots. And as the leader of the Latin world, the emperor could see his duty marked out for him. The credo could also show him the practical means of accomplishing his mission: introduction into Mexico of a monarchy ruled by a European prince.

The idea that monarchy was the only proper system of governance for Mexico was by no means recent. From the time that Mexico broke away from Spain early in the nineteenth century and adopted a republican constitution many had believed republicanism a temporary and disastrous aberration. By mid-century, the continuous political turbulence in the Latin American republics appeared as *prima facie* evidence of the truth of the monarchist thesis, which by then had be-

the negotiations preceding it is Carl H. Bock, *Prelude to Tragedy: The Negotiation and Breakdown of the Tripartite Convention of London, October 31, 1861* (Philadelphia, 1966). Two standard short treatments from different perspectives are J. P. T. Bury, *Napoleon III and the Second Empire* (London, 1964), pp. 133-139; and Henry Bamford Parkes, *A History of Mexico*, 3rd ed. (Boston, 1966), pp. 251-174.

38. Chevalier, *Le Mexique*, p. 508.

come deeply implanted in *bien pensant* opinion. Mexico, it was said, had betrayed her Latin heritage when it had sought to emulate the government of the Anglo-Americans. Inevitably the attempt to graft on its people a governance alien to it had failed; the result was political anarchy and economic ruin. A rich and potentially productive land lay wasted while its people exhausted itself in unending and meaningless civil war.³⁹

For did not everyone know that a monarchy was a necessity for *les races latines*? If even the enlightened and civilized Latin nations of Europe were in need of its stabilizing influence, how could the Mexicans, childlike and ignorant, hope to survive without its discipline? "Luxury-loving and disorderly, gently and easily led, naturally given to flights of fancy, careless of his political rights, the Mexican is neither by taste nor habit adapted to republican austerity," pronounced the *Annuaire des deux mondes* in 1850. "Under the stable government of a monarchy . . . Mexico could have avoided ten revolutions that have impoverished, devastated, and dismembered it."⁴⁰ The French minister in Mexico at the time could not have agreed more thoroughly. "What is taking place at this moment proves once more . . . that the Mexicans with their indolence, their improvidence, their greed, their lack of patriotism, are ill suited for a federal regime," he reported. "[And] if they are to enter on the path of social progress they will need a government that is not only centralized but that is strong, energetic, even despotic to give them discipline and direct their political education."⁴¹ Such indeed had been the views of each of the

39. The European diplomatic corps in Mexico from the 1830s through the 1850s was virtually unanimous in its belief that Mexico could not be governed except by a monarchy. Typical was the statement of British minister, Charles Otway, who described the Mexicans as "degenerate descendants" of the Spaniards: "It is only from a *Foreign Power* that we can ever expect to obtain an efficient Govt here." Otway to Malmesbury, private, Mexico, Aug. 2, 1858, Public Record Office: FO 50/323. Of the seven British ministers and *chargés d'affaires* in Mexico between 1830 and 1861, only one, George B. Mathew, a *chargé d'affaires* of brief tenure, had any tolerance whatsoever for Mexican statesmen. The Spanish diplomats were equally as disdainful. The Spanish minister, Pedro Pascual Oliver, wrote in 1843: "Constitutional monarchy with a European prince would certainly be the form of government that could raise this country from its present degradation and prostration and restrain its pride and hatred of foreigners." Oliver to Spanish Foreign Ministry, Mexico, Jan. 20, 1843, *Relaciones diplomáticas hispano-mexicanas (1838-1898): Documentos procedentes del archivo de la embajada de España en México*. Serie I: *Despachos generales* (México, 1949), I, 27, no. 11. For a discussion of these views see Barker, "Monarchy in Mexico," pp. 53-55.

40. *Annales des deux mondes*, 1 (1850), 902.

41. André Nicolas Levasseur to French Foreign Minister, Mexico, July 1, 1851, AMAE, CP: Mexique, vol. 39, no. 70.

five French ministers plenipotentiary in Mexico from the time France recognized Mexico in 1830 until the intervention of the 1860s. Two of them—Baron Alleye de Cyprey in the 1840s and Viscount Gabriac in the 1850s—had devoted much of their time to the drawing up and submission of detailed proposals for the introduction of a European prince into Mexico. A third, Dubois de Saligny (the former chargé d'affaires in Texas), called so energetically for intervention in 1861 that he provided the emperor with the opportunity to act.⁴²

Behind these views lay the conviction that a nation's character determined the type of government it must have and that a nation's vices or virtues had their roots more in heredity (read as race) than in environment or in historical past. It was a belief by no means confined to France. The historian George M. Fredrickson finds precisely the same type of prejudgments in the debate taking place in the New World on the character of the blacks and their destined place on the American continent. His conclusion is that by mid-century "democracy itself was beginning to be defined as racial in origin and thus realizable perhaps only by people with certain hereditary traits."⁴³

By setting in motion an expedition to establish a monarchy in Mexico, the emperor was thus moving in accordance with the consensus of his day. He was taking an action that had long been urgently recommended to him by distinguished and experienced men on both sides of the Atlantic. Edouard Thouvenel, his foreign minister in 1861 when he embarked on the adventure, was quick to defend the purpose of the intervention. "This [strong and rational] government for the latin races, is it possible except under a monarchy?" he questioned rhetorically in a letter to the French ambassador in London in 1861. "I think

42. "Mémoire sur la situation du Mexique en mars 1844," Alleye de Cyprey, *ibid.*, vol. 26; Alleye de Cyprey to Guizot, Mexico, no. 228, Mar. 18, 1844, *ibid.*, vol. 28; Alleye de Cyprey to Emile Desages, private, Feb. 29, Mar. 19, June 28, 1844, AMAE, Papiers Desages, vol. 36; Note remise à Mgr. le Duc d'Aumale, Jan. 2, 1857, Radepont Papers, Harvard College Library, Houghton Library, Cambridge, Mass.; and Aimé Louis-Victor du Bosc, Marquis of Radepont to Gabriac, Paris, Nov. 26, 1856, *ibid.* (Radepont was the agent of Gabriac who carried the French minister's monarchical proposals to France.) See the reports of Dubois de Saligny to Edouard Thouvenel, *passim*, from spring to autumn 1861, AMAE, CP: Mexique, vols. 54–57.

43. George M. Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817–1914* (New York, 1971), p. 99. Gene M. Brack has explained Mexican bellicosity as originating in fear of these racist North American views: *Mexico Views Manifest Destiny, 1821–1846* (Albuquerque, 1975), *passim*. See also the book by Frederick Merk, *Manifest Destiny and Mission in American History: A Reinterpretation* (New York, 1963), and James E. Crisp, "Anglo-Texan Attitudes Toward the Mexican, 1821–1845" (Ph.D. Diss., Yale University, 1976), which arrive at similar conclusions.

not," he answered his own question, "and everyone assures me that all honest and sensible people in Mexico think the same."⁴⁴

How thoroughly the emperor believed in the monarchist thesis may be seen in a letter that he wrote at the outset of the intervention designed to acquaint the British government with the aims of his Mexican policy. The "anarchy," the "approaching ruin," and the "encroachments of North America" in Mexico, he began, necessitated its "regeneration." How should this be accomplished? His answer, implicit rather than explicit, was constructed on the premise that internal order and prosperity could come only with the introduction of a European prince. For some time, he wrote, he had desired to help the Mexicans but had been deterred by one or another circumstance beyond his control. But now the situation was favorable. The outbreak of civil war in the United States precluded resistance in that quarter. Consequently, he proposed to proceed with his plan "to establish a stable order of things in a country stirred by so many revolutions" and put forth the name of Archduke Ferdinand Maximilian as his princely candidate. The redress of French grievances in Mexico, he admitted, would be the "ostensible," not the true purpose of the expedition, which was to establish a monarchy. He concluded: "it would be impossible for me, without violating good faith . . . [not to work toward] a change [of government] that I wish with all my heart, because it is in the interest of civilization in general."⁴⁵

The emperor was the more ready to undertake the intervention because he assumed it would be easy to accomplish. First of all, he seems to have believed sincerely that a majority of Mexicans, or at least a majority of those Mexicans who mattered, truly desired a monarchy and would greet his army and his princely protégé with joy and acclaim. Their march to the capital would be a triumphal procession. When he offered the throne to the Archduke, he promised that it should rest not only on the support of France but on the freely expressed will of the Mexican people.⁴⁶ Why should he have thought otherwise? For years the Mexican émigrés in Paris and the French ministers and their agents in his Mexican legation had bombarded him

44. Thouvenel to Count Auguste Charles Joseph Flahault, private, Paris, Sept. 19, 1861, in Louis Thouvenel, *Le secret de l'empereur: Correspondance confidentielle et inédite*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1889), I, 162-169.

45. Napoleon III to Flahault, Compiègne, Oct. 9, 1861, reproduced in English translation in Bock, *Prelude to Tragedy*, pp. 495-497.

46. *Ibid.*, p. 497. For the emperor's negotiations with the archduke and the Austrian government, see Barker, "France, Austria, and the Mexican Venture, 1861-1864," *French Historical Studies*, 3 (Fall 1963), 224-245.

with assurances of the unanimous desire of the Mexicans for a European prince.

Secondly, he thought that if his army did encounter resistance it could be easily overcome. The belief in Mexican inferiority was too deeply ingrained for him to have imagined otherwise. Within a year of the end of the "Pastry War," the French minister in Mexico was assuring his superiors in Paris that Mexico was easy to conquer and that Baudin had exaggerated its military potential. Before a French army, he wrote, "the Mexican republic would fall as easily, even more easily, than the Empire of Montezuma had fallen in the past."⁴⁷ The war of the United States against Mexico in the 1840s, which saw the American army march to the Mexican capital, appeared as further proof of the inability of the Mexicans to defend themselves. In the 1850s, French minister plenipotentiary Gabriac had harped incessantly on the ease with which a monarchical expedition could be brought off. His successor, Dubois de Saligny, sometimes called the "evil genius" of the Maximilian affair, dilated upon the anarchy, the social decomposition, and the "war of castes" within Mexico that reduced it to impotence. Its army, he wrote, was made up of *léperos* and commanded by popinjays. Typical was his statement of September 1861: "With each passing day I am more inclined to believe that nothing could prevent a corps of 4,000 to 5,000 European soldiers from marching right to Mexico City without encountering the slightest resistance."⁴⁸ Thus the emperor like Louis Philippe before him commenced operations with forces inadequate to the end in view. Eventually he had over 30,000 men tied up in Mexico who, although they could fight their way to the capital, could never put an end to guerrilla warfare and assert imperial authority throughout the hinterland.

But to demonstrate that widely accepted racial ideologies and prejudices provided the rationale behind the Mexican intervention and to some degree the incentive for undertaking it is not to assert that the factor of race alone could have caused it to take place. The *grande pensée* was but one part of the emperor's Grand Design for his foreign and domestic policy, in which questions of economics, politics, and diplomacy were inextricably woven. In it European affairs came first. The Mexican expedition, attractive though it was to the emperor, was far down on the list of his priorities. Before he could undertake it

47. Alleye de Cyprey to Thiers, Mexico, July 13, 1840, AMAE, CP: Mexique, vol. 19, no. 11, fols. 77-85.

48. Dubois de Saligny to Thouvenel, Mexico, Sept. 19, 1861, *ibid.*, vol. 55, no. 47.

he had first to establish his authority at home, foster French economic development (he presided over what has been called France's first industrial revolution), send soldiers to Rome and Algeria, fight one war in the Crimea and another in Italy. And even when his hands were relatively free by 1861, he might still have left the *grande pensée* an unfulfilled dream had it not been closely associated with other cherished goals of his foreign and domestic policy: his desire to ally with England to check the growth of the American giant, his hope of bringing to Europe the trade of the Orient via a canal across the Isthmus of Tehuantepec (in accordance with his Saint Simonian economic theories) and last but certainly not least, his campaign for an alliance with Austria (hence the choice of an Austrian archduke as his princely candidate) to aid him in a coming test with Prussia on the Rhine.⁴⁹ Finally, the eruption of the Civil War in the United States provided him the opportunity to flout the Monroe Doctrine and to export the monarchical system to the New World.

But could the Mexican intervention have come about without the concomitant factor of race? It is scarcely conceivable. The belief that Mexico was ungovernable except by a monarchy was racist at bottom. The *grande pensée* was in fact a plan of action to realize the destinies of *les races latines*. It was neither the first nor the last ideology to promote adventurism overseas. Hannah Arendt has told us in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*: "The fact that racism is the main ideological weapon of imperialistic politics is so obvious that it seems as though many students prefer to avoid the beaten path of truism."⁵⁰ In the hands of the emperor that weapon was used to persuade him of the beneficence and the nobility of his Mexican policy. And for a visionary and at the same time well-intentioned ruler like Napoleon III, such beliefs were the prerequisites for action.

49. See Barker, "France, Austria, and the Mexican Venture," *French Historical Studies*, pp. 224–245. Chevalier gave a thorough explanation of the importance of a canal across the Isthmus of Tehuantepec in the emperor's Mexican policy: *Le Mexique*, pp. 437–449. For the financial intrigue surrounding the project, see Barker, "The French Legation in Mexico: Nexus of Interventionists," *French Historical Studies*, 7 (Spring 1974), 409–426.

50. (New York, 1951), p. 160.