

# *“When We Were an Empire” The Monarchical Experiment in Mexico (1864-1867)*

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Édouard Manet, *Execution of Emperor Maximilian*, 1868. Kunsthalle, Mannheim.

Few events in the history of Mexico had an impact on the Western imaginary like Maximilian’s empire. By 1868, vanguard painter Édouard Manet immortalized his tragic end in a canvas that would cause a sensation

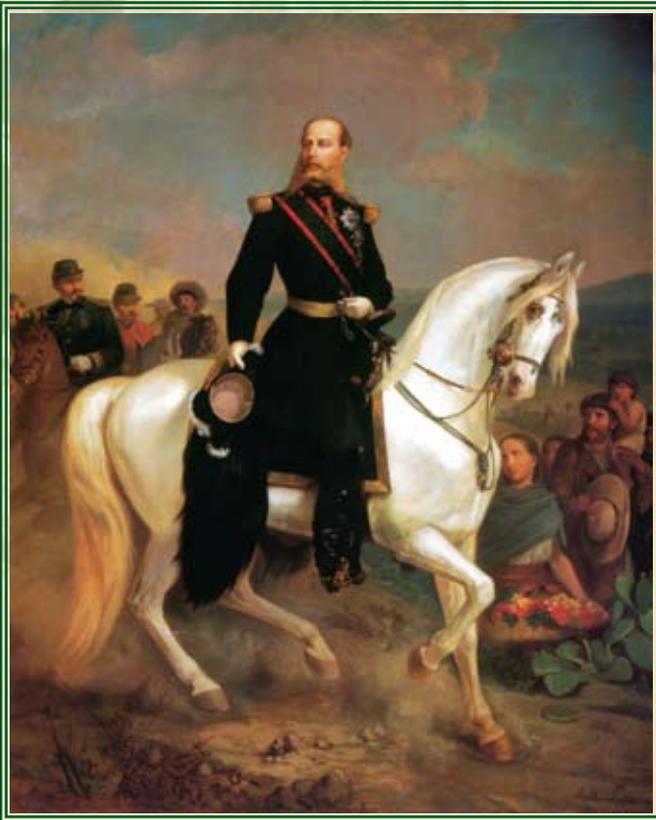
both in France and in other European countries. The sad story of the unfortunate prince and princess —young, intelligent, and supposedly handsome— has been the topic of a large number of testimonies, history books, novels, plays, and even a movie starring Bette Davis. Mexicans, on the other hand, have an ambiguous relationship with this episode. The descendants of the “victims” of the French intervention also get excited at the imperial melodrama that inspired the theater of Rodolfo Usigli, a short story by Carlos Fuentes, the fantastic novel by Fernando del Paso, and several soap operas. Maximilian and Carlotta are characters —poor things!— that

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Jean-Adolphe Beaucé, *Emperor Maximilian on Horseback*, 1865 (oil on canvas).  
National History Museum.

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the average Mexican is both familiar and most of the time sympathizes with.

However, traditional history has written off the imperial episode, holding that nothing of importance happened under the monarchy. As José Fuentes Mares said, between 1864 and 1867, Mexico took refuge in the desert and only the initiatives of Juárez and his charmed circle, holed up in Paso del Norte, actually shaped historic events. The empire has been classified in the national memory as a frivolous government, but above all as something totally alien to Mexican reality, against which all the true sons of the homeland rose up, except for a couple of recalcitrant conservatives. For official history, the only value the so-called “empire” left behind was that its defeat won Mexico what Justo Sierra would call “indisputable and undisputed” right to call itself a nation. However, the empire shared many of the objectives and faced many of the same challenges that governments before it had. Thus, Maximilian’s administration managed to build an efficient

machine to govern, foster economic development, and invent a shared memory that would link together a profoundly damaged, splintered society, at the same time that it tried to deal with the pressures from the powers Mexico owed money to. The *chiaroscuros* and complexities of the imperial project reveal that the episode is firmly ensconced in Mexican historical experience.

Setting up a “modern” state in Mexico that could resist the onslaught of foreign aggression and internal instability, and that could ensure order and the rule of law across the country was an objective shared by all men in public life in the nineteenth century, regardless of political persuasion. Given the chronic disorder and the post-colonial context of economic backwardness and increasing expansion of the European powers, this dream became an obsession, above all after the defeat at the hands of the United States, alarming proof that things were in a very bad way indeed.

For the young liberals who walked onto the stage of national politics with the 1855 Ayutla Revolution, the happiness of the nation—and even its survival—was firmly fixed in the destruction of what they saw as the dead weight handed down from colonial times. In addition to reestablishing federalism and democratizing public life, with the 1857 Constitution, they sought, then, to guarantee equality before the law, eliminating any kind of immunity; to rev up the economy by confiscating the goods of civic and ecclesiastic communities; and to put a brake on the Catholic Church’s economic, social, and political power, taking away its real estate and establishing freedom of the press and education. For the conservatives, who opposed this by taking up arms, liberal principles were fundamentally a source of disorganization: they set up a weak government, and, by attacking the Church, and therefore the Catholic religion, destroyed the only link that united Mexicans. The civil war that this clash produced was the bloodiest the country had experienced since independence. After the liberal victory, Benito Juárez took the helm of a nation divided, spent, and ruined.

Under these circumstances, and with the Mexican government’s decision to suspend payments agreed to with its creditor nations, a foreign invasion would superimpose itself on the conflict between liberals and conservatives. Napoleon III saw in the Mexican conflict and the civil war that was consuming the United States an opportunity to be able to put into practice what some called “the grand thinking” of his reign: establishing a presence for France in the New World, to ensure its access to the markets and raw materials

of the Americas, particularly the silver, essential for a country whose currency had a two-metal base, and to protect the “Latin race” from its voracious northern neighbor. The suspension of payments and the lobbying a few Mexicans had been doing since the 1840s to get a foreign prince to Mexico were the excuse the French emperor needed to embark on the “Mexican adventure.”

The tripartite intervention had the single aim of forcing a recalcitrant republic to live up to its financial obligations. Spain and England withdrew once their claims had been satisfied, but the French army remained to put Maximilian of Habsburg, the younger brother of the Austrian emperor, on the throne and keep him there. The resplendent Mexican empire owed its existence to the expeditionary forces, and agreed to be responsible for the claims of French subjects, for the costs of the military expedition, and the debts accumulated by previous governments. Between 1862 and 1867, 30,000 French soldiers occupied Mexico, suffering no definitive defeats, but they were unable to pacify it. In the end, in the face of U.S. diplomatic pressures once the War of Secession was over, and since France was threatened by an expansionary Prussia, the French emperor’s cost-benefit analysis began to tip into the red, with which he decided to put an end to the ex-

pedition and repatriate the army. With the advance of the republicans and without its military base, the empire collapsed.

In hindsight and given how scandalous the failure was, the “Mexican adventure” seems to be the least reasonable of Napoleon the Little’s initiatives. What springs to mind is that in Mexico, important sectors of the population saw a monarchy imposed by French bayonets as a viable regime and even an opportunity for building a better life. In answer to Maximilian’s requirement that to accept the throne, he had to be called by “the entire nation,” an important portion of the city councils in central Mexico wrote “declarations of allegiance.” These sanctioned the intervention and subscribed to the government of the Austrian emperor.

There is no doubt that the pressures of the invading army were decisive for the writing of these documents: their proclamation came on the heels of the advancing French troops. The very towns that declared themselves for the empire in 1863 and 1864 wrote similar declarations two, three, or four years later to hail the return of the republican order. However, it should also be taken into account that the arrival of a modern, professional army that announced it would not live off the land it was occupying meant for many communities a temporary relief from the forced conscription and pillage



Cesare Dell'Acqua, *The Mexican Delegation Offers Maximilian the Crown*, 1864 (oil on canvas). Miramar Castle, Italy.



Jean-Adolphe Beaucé, *Visit of the Kikapoo Tribe Legation to Emperor Maximilian*, circa 1865 (oil on canvas).  
Artstetten Castle Museum, Austria.

they had been afflicted with for so many years of war at the hands of both liberals and conservatives. While communities like Xochipulco in the mountains of Puebla preferred to burn their houses down rather than hand the town over to the invaders, many others saw in the intervention a favorable moment to restructure their relations with regional and national powers. The enthusiastic way that these towns went to the Council to Protect the Deserving Classes, a body created by Maximilian to deal with complaints from peasant communities, as well as the military support the French were given by indigenous groups (the Coras from Lozada, Nayarit; the Ópatas from Tanori, Sonora; and different communities in Oaxaca and Michoacán), seem to confirm this point of view.

The expeditionary army said it was bringing peace, something long yearned for by a society that practically since 1854 had been living in a permanent state of trepidation because of increasingly intransigent violence. By contrast, those politicians who cooperated with the empire did so based on very different projects. The supporters of the monarchy were not only those one would naturally expect: conservatives who, defeated on the field of battle, saw in the empire the last card to be able to stay in the political game. Another group of public men with long experience and diverse party ties who had played an outstanding role in the country's political and cultural activities since the 1840s also collaborated with Maximilian. These liberals and moderate conservatives believed that the regime headed by a European prince, "protected" by

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France, and sustained by its army, was an opportunity to put their house in order and do all the things that, since independence, political instability and the constant clashes between the legislative and executive branches of government, national and state authorities, had not allowed them to do.

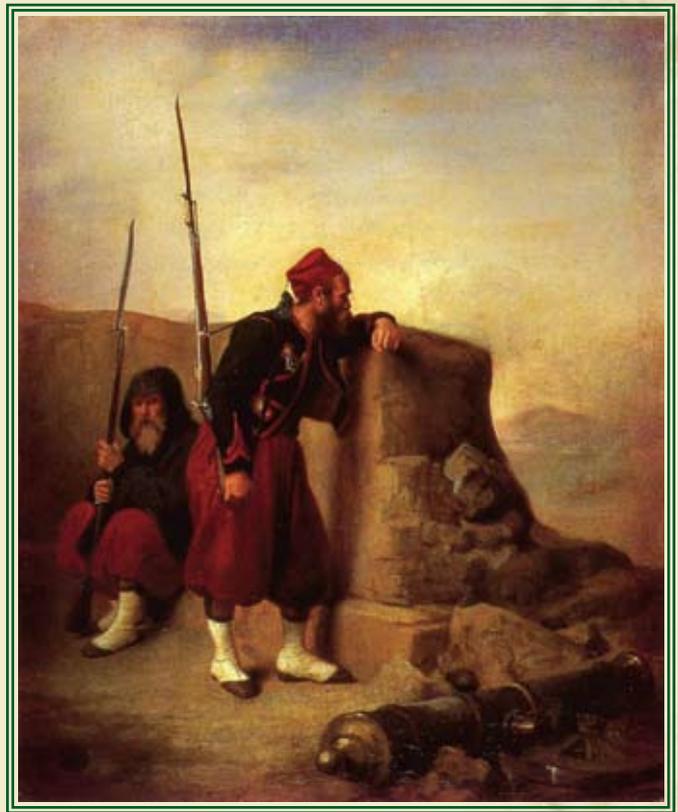
The presence of the "the world's foremost army" in Mexico inspired ambivalence among those who collaborated with the empire. Most perceived it as humiliating. This was the case, above all, of military men who had to submit to the orders of French officers or who, like two of the main conservative leaders, Miguel Miramón and Leonardo Márquez, left the country on merely ornamental diplomatic missions. Nevertheless, many Mexican politicians saw an advantage to the invasion: they believed that the presence of professional armed forces firmly subjected to state authority would free up the government from its exhausting negotiations with "strongmen" who, down through the century, had so often tipped the scales of political order. They did not take into account that this was a disciplined, civically-oriented "armed wing" of a state that was not Mexico's.

On the other hand, all the supporters of the empire wanted to consolidate an efficient state that would join in brotherhood—the term used at the time—order and liberty. They had different visions, however, of the form it should take and what its policy priorities should be. On the one hand were those who, like Zacatecas-born lawyer Teodosio Lares, wanted to provide the government with the administrative tools to be able to act effectively, but not arbitrarily, to have an impact on the national situation. While since the fall of the Emperor Agustín de Iturbide, few had tried—and all unsuccessfully—to promote a monarchy, these men defended a monarchical system with decidedly modern arguments: this was the form of government most in Mexico’s interest, not because of its monarchist, centralist traditions, but because it was the regime that could tame and channel modern political struggle. As the newspaper *La Razón* explained, under the aegis of the empire, Mexicans could be anything they wanted, except emperor.

Thus, the executive branch could not be the prisoner of either armed uprisings or electoral trickery. The political parties, which had been the driving force of instability and conflict, would not stop existing; they would merely be left without a sparring arena to get hurt in. Therefore, by freezing political struggle, the empire made it possible to pass laws and build institutions that the country so urgently needed. Thus, in 1866 the first national civil code was passed. The imperial civil code, written by lawyers Benito Juárez had commissioned in 1861 (José María Lacunza, José Fernando Ramírez, Pedro Escudero y Echánove, and Luis Méndez) was the basis for the one the liberal government would publish in 1870.

Historian, geographer, and linguist Manuel Orozco y Berra based himself on “scientific” criteria to develop a new division of the national territory into 50 departments, with the aim of breaking up the power base of regional *caciques* or strongmen. In addition, there was no lack of empire supporters who thought that the government of a prince linked to the main European dynasties would attract investors. In the end, they were not so wrong, even if the results were not as desirable as they had hoped for. So, while within the imperial government, they were never able to come to an agreement about what proportion of foreign capital a national bank should have, the Bank of London, Mexico and South America opened a branch in Mexico City with no government authorization. The construction of the railroad from Mexico City to Veracruz, a project that had dragged along since the 1830s, got a decided push forward when the French army,

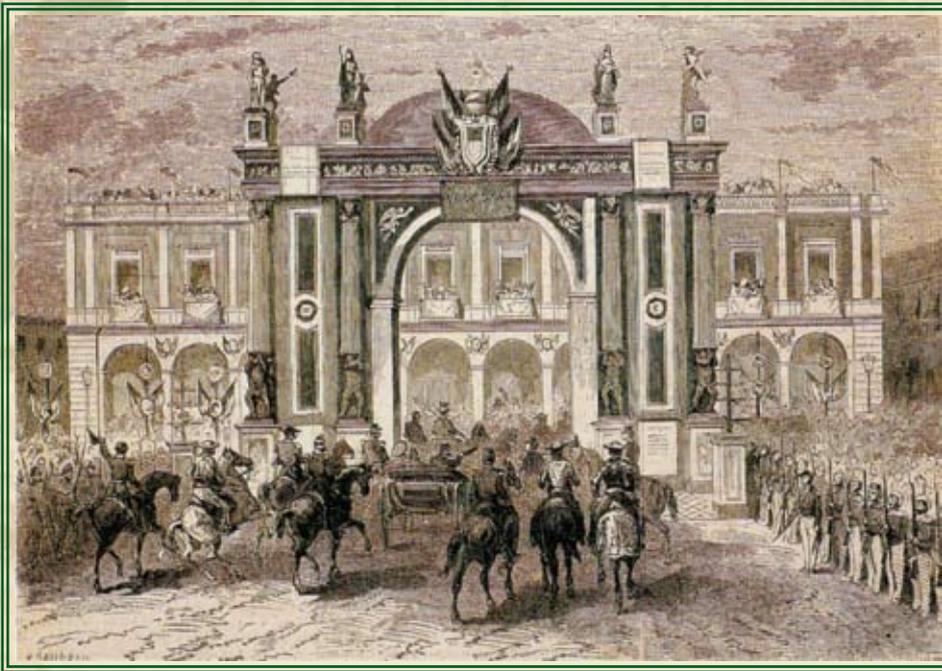
concerned about the unhealthy climate on the coast, concluded the length of track to Paso del Macho and Maximilian inaugurated the route from the capital city to La Villa. Also, for the first time since the end of the 1820s, the Mexican government managed to float debt in the European markets. However, this was of no benefit to Maximilian’s government, since the expeditionary army consumed all the resources that came in; it also did no good for the small French savers who bought the imperial “little blues”—as the debt was known—since the



Pablo Valdés, *Advance Guard of Zouaves*, 1865 (oil on canvas). Artstetten Castle Museum, Austria.

Juárez government would ultimately disavow Maximilian’s financial commitments.

On the other hand, no one saw the ascension of the young Habsburg with as much hope as the Catholics, who had faith that a prince descended from the Catholic kings and who had gone to Rome to ask for the Pope’s blessing before embarking for Mexico, would reestablish harmony between civil and ecclesiastic powers. They thought Mexico, as a Catholic people, “should be catholically ruled.” They did not count on the devout Austrian turning out to be not only a liberal but also a defender of royal supremacy *vis-à-vis* the Church. Maxi-



J. Gaildrau, *The Emperor and Empress of Mexico in Vera-Cruz* [sic], 1864 (engraving). Álvaro Castillo Olmedo collection.

milian ratified the nationalization of ecclesiastic property, the abolition of immunity, and religious tolerance. He also proposed a concordat with the Vatican that stipulated that the emperor would appoint the country's bishops, and the government would pay for expenses involved in worship, to avoid the abuses the priests committed when they charged money to perform the sacraments. Even the most intransigent of bishops, like Clemente de Jesús Munguía, archbishop of Michoacán, reluctantly recognized that the form of separation of Church and state implemented by the republican government was more in their interest than Maximilian's.

Similarly, as the long yearned-for project of erecting a regime in which Catholicism was the cement of the body politic faded away, many conservatives felt excluded from the historic saga with which Maximilian's government hoped to create a shared memory that would link all Mexicans together through patriotic fiestas and public art. With the participation of renowned historians like José Fernando Ramírez, a former cabinet minister, and Manuel Larráinzar, who would propose his project of writing a "general history" of Mexico to the Imperial Academy of Sciences and the Arts, the imperial government wanted to narrate the nation's past as a long, conciliatory odyssey with a great many more heroes than villains. Nevertheless, the exaltation of the pre-Hispanic past, which the conservatives dubbed barbarian, of the heroes of liberalism, who they considered criminals, and of the possibilities of mixing the races offended many Hispanophile, European-enamored conservatives. It was not the

time for a moderate historical vision like that of the empire's supporters.

The first general history, by Spaniard Niceto de Zamacois, was not to appear for another 10 years. The monumental work of nineteenth-century historiography, *México a través de los siglos* (Mexico Down through the Centuries) (1884), which for decades would be the model for the shape of Mexico's past, made the rise of liberalism the central theme of the nation's history. This left out the conservatives, who did not turn out to be very good Mexicans.

At the end of the day, in the context of constant warfare, imperial policies had scant results. After the French withdrawal, the regime that had channeled such different interests and conflicting projects seemed to have very little to offer. Thus, two experiments failed: the French imperialist project in the Americas, and the Mexican monarchy. With the defeat of the empire, 1867 is a watershed in the political development of the Mexican state, when one of the alternatives that had given shape to the struggle for power at least since 1857 was cancelled. Historiography, as we have seen, would trim down the role of the conservatives, labeling them not only myopic, but traitors, and would turn the empire into a ridiculous—and above all, irrelevant—regimen. Nevertheless, it is an episode that deserves to be reevaluated since it sheds light on the complex attempts and efforts of a political class that, after decades of failures and with no prescribed model, was still seeking to create the regime that was possible. ■■

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