The Vanguard of the Atlantic World

Sanders, James E.

Published by Duke University Press

Sanders, James E.
The Vanguard of the Atlantic World: Creating Modernity, Nation, and Democracy in Nineteenth-Century Latin America.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/69169

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2500402
The Garibaldinos’ confidence in their own republican struggle, and their sense that Europe needed American inspiration, found little echo in most conceptions of modernity before mid-century. Elite intellectuals tended to look to Europe for civilization, and by the 1840s they despaired at the state of American progress as often as they expressed any faith in the potential of the new republican nations. It is in this period that Latin American intellectuals cemented their assessments of European culture and civilization as superior and exemplary, as well as sowing doubts about the suitability of republicanism for their own societies. These thinkers developed a vision of Europhile cultural modernity that imagined progress as best achieved by imitating European models of high culture, wealth, propriety, urbanity, discipline, and whiteness. Thus, the postindependence generation laid the foundation for the current of modernity that would continually challenge and counter American republican modernity throughout the rest of the century. Surveying the state of their new nations, adherents of Europhile modernity generally despaired at the state of American civilization (if such a thing even existed!), gloomily proclaiming that the judgment of Europe (the single truly civilized world) could only look on the new American nations as failures.

The epitome of this vision of pessimism is Simón Bolívar’s famous quote: “America is ungovernable . . . those who serve revolution plough the sea.”
Bolívar’s despair overcame the sense of potential and hope that had bloomed immediately after independence. Puebla’s El Farol, although still acknowledging the tutorship of “European Enlightenment,” declared in 1821 that America—the former pupil—would now become the professor, as Americans “find themselves ready to give lessons to Europe, and Providence seems to destine them to be from here on the teachers and reformers of the world.” La Minerva Guanajuatense also reflected such provincial optimism, predicting that Mexico’s industries would soon rival those of Europe and observing that they had nothing “to envy” even from England. The paper somewhat bemusedly commented on a public atmosphere that dismissed “decrepit Europe” in favor of the men of “young America,” who “were born to teach the world what liberty and patriotism are.” The Spanish invasion of Mexico in 1829 evoked paeans to American “republican virtues” as “children of liberty” in contrast to Spain’s “degrading slavery,” ruled over by a “barbarous King.” Such confidence about the Americas’ role in modernity in contrast to European barbarism would soon be rare, but it would reappear as the central trope of American republican modernity after mid-century.

More common by the late 1820s were Bolívar’s attitudes of looking on Spanish America with disgust and despairing over the anarchy, chaos, corruption, and general failures of the new nations and their republican systems. For Bolívar, America was not moving forward to modernity but backward, as a land dominated by “feudal lords.” Indeed, there was little hope: “From one end to the other, the New World is a vast abyss of abomination.” Republicanism was a farce and the new nations, failures. In short, America was not at the vanguard of modernity, but at risk of being “the laughing-stock of the world.” Bolívar looked more to Europe’s “wisdom and experience” and Great Britain and its constitutional monarchy as an exemplar than to any American innovations. By the 1860s, the public sphere would celebrate America as the future of the world, but in 1830, instead of moving toward the future, it seemed more likely to the Liberator that America would “revert to primitive chaos.”

Bolívar’s pessimism about republicanism and the Americas’ standing in the race to civilization soon became quite generalized across Latin America, eventually becoming the master narrative (if one that was often challenged) of the letrado class. By the late 1820s, the chaotic political situation had dashed any early hopes in Mexico. Constant civil wars and coups created a revolving-door presidency, with chief executives serving on average less than a year; the caudillo and political operative Antonio López de Santa Anna alone took office on eleven different occasions between 1833 and 1855.
the public sphere of daily political discourse, newspapers fretted that “the apostles of anarchy, sedition and disorder” had so corrupted the pueblo with their demagoguery that Mexico risked a “total degeneration of society.”

Editors declared that “the Republic is visibly declining,” as indicated by a collapse of “public confidence” and capital flight. Due to the deterioration of the respect for property and individual liberties, they warned of the “ruin of the republic” and the “horrors of barbarous despotism.” Mexico was hardly alone. As the young state faced yet another armed uprising in 1832, one writer warned that if such chaos continued, “we would succumb to a military anarchy, perhaps more pernicious than that in Colombia.” Although they had been optimistic in 1825, by 1827 the editors of El Observador de la República Mexicana did not think the nation had moved forward toward modernity; rather, it had experienced a “fatal retrogression.”

In the mid-1840s, many found Latin America’s situation little improved. In still-colonial Cuba, El Diario de la Marina surveyed the whole of the Americas, noting the looming war between Mexico and the United States, the continued coups in Central America, the rule of caudillos in Peru, and the conflict between Buenos Aires and Montevideo. The newspaper concluded: “Such is the sad state of the American continent.” In Uruguay, El Constitucional agreed, sighing that nothing was more “melancholy and deplorable” than the present situation of the New World. Bolívar, though often imagining himself a lone Cassandra, presaged the fears, uncertainty, and gloom that dominated the public sphere after the first blush of independence’s promise had faded.

Europhile Cultural Modernity

If Bolívar epitomized the pessimism and disillusion with republicanism of the postindependence era, it was Domingo Faustino Sarmiento who, in 1845, provided the intellectual basis for analyzing the problems of the early American nations by proposing his famous dichotomy between civilization and barbarism. However, while Bolívar despaired at the end of his life, Sarmiento was much more optimistic, proffering a solution to America’s problems. Sarmiento would not have disagreed with much of Bolívar’s assessment of America’s state but thought it correctable, if Americans would follow the proper path and aspire to European civilization. Like Bolívar, Sarmiento opposed the corrupt political leadership that he saw dominating the new American states, especially his own Argentina’s Juan Manuel Rosas (1835–52). Unless his regime ended, Rosas would doom Argentina to backwardness, due to his hostility to “the ideas, customs and civilization of European peoples.” Sarmiento famously constructed a dichotomy between
cities, where “the latest progresses of the human spirit” developed, and the barbarous countryside. It was in the cities where European civilization existed and from which modernity would flow: “The man of the city wears European clothes, lives a civilized life as we know it everywhere; there are laws, ideas of progress, means of instruction, some municipal organization, regular government, etc.” In the countryside, one found American clothes and American people but little industry, no education, no culture, and scant public life—in short, barbarism.

In Sarmiento, we see the clear linkage between what he called civilization and what academics call modernity. Sarmiento stressed that societies’ civilization was not a fixed state but a continuum, changing both in time (as societies improved or vegetated) and space, since in every nation, but especially in the Americas, the modern and the backward existed side by side: “The nineteenth century and the twelfth century live together, one in the cities, the other in the countryside.” Barbarism ruled the countryside not just because of the ignorance of the population, but also because of its mixture of European, indigenous, and African elements, who detested labor and industry. Although Sarmiento expressed some optimism that “indigenous barbarism” could be cured by education, mostly he hoped that the civilized cities would come to control the countryside, spreading European influence. Sarmiento was more optimistic than Bolívar that the Americas could obtain the “genius of European civilization,” but only by ensuring that the Eurocentric part of society became dominant. In this manner, Sarmiento encapsulated and promoted the Europhile modernity that would define the public sphere in the 1830s and 1840s and would dominate letrado thought for much longer. Civilization was basically a cultural attribute, linked to middle- and upper-class European behavior, manners, norms of living, race, and wealth. There was some concern with economics, as Latin America must develop some industry (mostly imagined at this time as export agriculture, not industrial production) in order to create the wealth necessary to sustain civilization. However, this economic concern was important mostly as a support to the critical cultural behavior that defined civilization. Similarly, unlike in American republican modernity, the type of politics (republican, democratic, constitutional, or monarchical) seemed less important than that the style was orderly and the ruling class had European sympathies. Politics were not critical in themselves, but the wrong politics (those of Rosas or the influence of the plebes, for example) could block these cultural aspirations, thus spreading barbarism.

Sarmiento’s work, of course, is considered the preeminent exemplar of
nineteenth-century elite political and cultural thought. This is correct in many ways, but misleading in two. First, many of the views on civilization that Sarmiento expressed had filled the public sphere long before his publications appeared. Over a decade before Sarmiento’s *Facundo* was published, the newspaper *Registro Oficial* noted that the fate of Mexico rested on “a war of civilization against barbarism, of property against thieves, of order against anarchy.” Second, Sarmiento represents the norm for the public sphere only at certain moments, not throughout the entire nineteenth century, as is often assumed. Indeed, by the time of their publication, his ideas were already being strongly challenged in the public sphere, as we saw in Montevedio. I will deal with the second concern in later chapters, but here let me examine how widespread were the views attributed to Sarmiento. Long before he made such claims dogma, a sense of civilization as defined by education, manners, order, and European norms had dominated public discourse. In 1821 *El Farol* lamented the state of Mexico’s population, in particular that there was so little education among its people, a problem even in the most “civilized nations” of Europe but one that was much worse in the emerging American states. Indeed, some blamed the pueblo’s “ignorance” for the general weakness of the nation and national sentiments across Latin America. As Sarmiento’s work attests, education was perhaps the single most prominent marker of civilization under Europhile cultural modernity.

Above all, civilization was broadly defined by high cultural attributes (as opposed to political or economic measures), and its locus centered upon Europe. Mexicans desired to imitate the lifestyle of “refined Europe” even in matters as trivial as public amusements, where theaters and salons should replace back-alley gambling dens. In its pursuit of a noble “sense of pleasure,” Mexico should emulate the land of the Saxons, “that great people.” Nothing marked elites as modern as much as having the latest dresses, pianos, pocket watches, or foodstuffs from Europe. Literature, of course, formed the bedrock of any “civilized nation,” and translations of the great European works should commence. Sarmiento cemented these cultural traits as synonymous with cultured urban life. However, it was not just adopting Europhile elite consumption tastes that mattered, but society’s broader refinement. The newspaper *Comercio del Plata* proposed that civilization was based on “sociability,” which denoted the pervasiveness of such traits as industriousness, pacificity, order, lawfulness, and decorum in a population. Like all nineteenth-century visions of civilization, this assumed a progression, depending on the extent to which such values had permeated society.
As the concern with sociability suggests, a society revealed its level of civilization by the educated life and manners that operated in the public sphere. Jürgen Habermas did not invent the obsession with the public sphere; it was a constant concern of nineteenth-century observers. El Observador de la República Mexicana argued that in civilized nations there was a distinction between “popular voice” and “public opinion.” Public opinion could be formed only by educated citizens: “There exists in civilized nations a body consecrated by nature . . . to teach and propose the means by which to make happy the patria.” “Philosophers” were those who had “civilized” the “barbarous pueblos.” If societies followed the popular voice, which was formed by “violence, by terror, by factions, by ignorance,” they would go down the same path that France had taken because of the Parisian masses. El Siglo Diez y Nueve argued that republicanism, more than any other political system, relied on the good sense of “public opinion,” which perhaps doomed Mexico due to the ignorance of the masses who insisted on participating in politics. As the century progressed, Liberals fretted that Mexico’s “ignorant and imbecilic pueblo” embraced “fanaticism” and religious superstition to such an extent that education might be impossible. The proponents of Europhile cultural modernity thought that only the civilizing opinion of the public sphere of the salon mattered (following Habermas’s ideal of rational bourgeois property holders); the raucous street, despite Sarmiento’s love of urbanity, carried the plague of barbarism. This theorization of the public sphere captured two concerns of cultural modernity. First, progress occurred due to the leadership of educated elites: it was a cultural action. Second, the uncultured and barbarous masses, whose influence must be limited, always threatened to undermine civilization.

In Mexico, many in the public sphere thought of the peripatetic Santa Anna (as Sarmiento thought of Rosas) as representing barbarism, due to his open lust for power and the support of the lower classes that he could marshal. Although Santa Anna’s opponents obviously envied his political success, they often coded their criticism of him in cultural terms: Santa Anna’s “sentiments little conform to the suavity of customs that inspires the lights of the century and modern civilization.” Of course they hated Santa Anna for his political prowess, but they expressed their displeasure in the terms of cultural modernity: Santa Anna did not act like a modern, educated, Europhile leader should. Worse, he undermined modernity with his attacks on “the aristocracy,” mocking those who wore “fine clothing,” “paid for seats in the theater,” had a maid, or whose table settings and culinary habits seemed too luxurious. Yet, for the letrados, going to the
theater, wearing fine clothes, and having the latest china were all marks of civilization.

Although undoubtedly cultural in its emphasis, Europhile modernity did not exist in isolation. Instead, it reflected and competed with other measures of civilization developing in the North Atlantic world, especially involving the changing economic and political realities that educated elites would foment. El Farol argued that the “glory of a nation” depended on the state of its arts and sciences, its good government, and its advancements in industry, commerce, and agriculture. The diplomat, politician, editor, and poet Joaquín M. de Castillo y Lanzas defined progress as involving educating the pueblo; improving the arts, agriculture, and commerce; enjoying peace; and encouraging industry. Most letrados and the public sphere accepted civilization as basically a cultural phenomenon, but the promise of commercial and industrial progress provided both the most potent secondary definition and the greatest challenge to Europhile cultural modernity and American republican modernity—and it would eventually triumph over both of them. In the 1820s and 1830s, however, improving the cultural life of the people, along European lines, was what allowed industry to develop. The most expeditious way to accomplish this would be to import Europeans. Large-scale immigration would provide labor and industry, ameliorate the common people’s culture, and improve society’s racial stock, which elites saw as dominated by “the degenerate and depraved race of the natives.”

While the exact measure of civilization remained open to debate, there was less uncertainty about modernity’s locus and the progress of the world’s nations. In the prevailing view, Latin America at best was only on the path to modernity, following Europe and the United States. Even optimists assumed that England, France, and other European states were “advanced on the road to civilization” and therefore had much to imitate. Youth, which later in the century would become a great strength, appeared in the late 1820s to represent the new nation-states’ fragility and insubstantiality. New nations were like unruly children, lacking both a reasoning populace provided by education and the material resources offered by a history of labor, especially compared to Europe’s cultural and economic maturity. Latin America was still pursuing modernity, making some advances but just as often suffering debilitating setbacks. These were due to disorder and anarchy in particular, but also to the racially problematic population, colonial past, rebellious plebeians, and lack of education. Anarchy, often codified as a cultural failing as well as a political condition, appeared to be an almost insurmountable hurdle. “Modern powers” had achieved their advancements
thanks to avoiding internal strife. The aptly titled *El Imperio de la Ley* (The rule of law) fretted that the “enemies of order” sought to “impede our progress toward civilization.” Los Amigos del Pueblo condemned Santa Anna for reducing Mexico to barbarism, since “modern civilization” had rejected such sordid Machiavellian actions as his constant plotting and coups. *El Género de la Libertad* despaired at the nation’s anarchic state, claiming that “civil war has broken all the ties of society,” so that only “ferocity” and “barbarism” remained. In “modern times,” there was no better mark of “civilization” than achieving “political order” over “turbulent anarchy.”

In 1839 de Castillo y Lanzas could look back to independence as bittersweet, given “our subsequent degradation.” The nation had failed due to political scheming and the collapse of the social bonds that held society together, all of which had contributed to the “retardation of our progresses.” *El Observador de la República Mexicana* despaired over plans to expel the Spanish from Mexico, noting that this would ruin the nation’s reputation in Europe and was not the action of a “halfway civilized nation.” As we saw in the last chapter, by the 1840s, some letrados had begun to challenge Europe; however, this reversal was unthinkable for many of them. Regarding the 1848 Congreso Americano in Lima, *El Siglo Diez y Nueve* mocked as “delirium” the idea that “the young, weak Spanish America would try to give laws to virile, strong Europe.” The public sphere constantly worried about how Europeans, as masters of civilization, would judge their new societies’ missteps.

**A Republican Façade**

If Europe were the measure of modernity, then the adoption of republicanism, hardly practiced in Europe at all, would raise grave doubts as to the best strategy for creating and governing a civilized society. Support for republicanism was constantly questioned. Of course, Mexico immediately experimented with monarchy after independence (under Agustín de Iturbide from 1822–23), which was seen as a way of limiting radical changes and controlling unruly subalterns, an overriding concern of Europhile modernity. Republicanism seemed too leveling and utopian; *El Farol* argued that it could work only in a society in which everyone enjoyed an “equality” of wealth. In contrast to later developments that stressed a common American republican bond, *El Sol* claimed republicanism might work in the United States but was ill-suited to Mexico, due to the country’s history, religion, state of development, unruly population, and lack of education and the peonage of most of the lower class. The paper argued that monarchy would best protect “liberty, property, and security.” At worst, republicanism could lead to a
social “revolution,” as had been the case in France. Reflecting a little-stated but very influential theme, El Observador de la República Mexicana argued that the form of government mattered little, as long as “civil liberty” existed. Although the royal sentiment was not as strong in Colombia, nevertheless constant rumors of monarchical projects regularly disrupted society there.

However, in general, ideas of republicanism as the best and most modern political system overcame monarchical sentiments. El Condor de Bolivia argued that the representative system represented the “perfection of political civilization.” Yet this same newspaper continually worried about republicanism’s efficacy and especially about the unsuitability of the majority of Bolivia’s residents for a republican system. Therefore, republicanism had to be sharply bounded to limit the pueblo’s influence. In 1826 the paper published an address by Bolívar in which he urged having a president for life. In Colombia, however, one senator declared the Bolivian constitution an embarrassment to “this century of enlightenment and liberty,” since it would make a citizen nothing but a “beast of burden.” Another senator, Francisco Soto, refuted those who said that without Bolívar’s strong hand Colombia or Bolivia would fall apart, arguing that it mattered little to him whether a state lost any one province; instead, “as a member of the human species I wish that liberty would reign everywhere.” We see the germination of the idea that would come to fruition under American republicanism: that the universal struggle for liberty trumped any passing material or local concerns.

Although a few writers celebrated republicanism’s liberatory potential, many more questioned its suitability for Latin America. Some began to doubt that simply borrowing republican institutions from the United States would work, due to the higher level of education there, and warned that either the institutions must change or the people must be changed. El Genio de la Libertad thought that Santa Anna demonstrated the weakness of Mexico’s republican institutions, as he had seized power with the support of a “mob” composed of the “most vile rabble,” who should be excluded from politics. Elections themselves could be a problem, if too broad a class of citizens participated. In an 1852 letter to Juan María Gutiérrez, Juan Bautista Alberdi declared that “while the law calls on the mob to vote, the mob will elect children that tell them pretty words.” Thus republicanism shared the same preoccupations as did Europhile cultural modernity: were the pueblo educated enough, European enough, and civilized enough for a representative system of government? As discussed earlier, Europhile modernity was not largely political, but for those who saw republicanism as representing
modernity, the new republics had clearly failed. In 1832 El Genio de la Libertad declared that the misery of the last six years were “the fruits of the imprudent development of modern theories, the fruit of Jacobinism and the Enlightenment, of demagogic furor and party spirit.”

A number of Guatemalans made similar claims in 1848, noting that following “the modern systems” of republicanism, liberalism, and constitutionalism and other “pretty theories” had produced only “many evils in both the Old and New Worlds.” The pursuit of “lauded progress” had resulted in “uprisings, revolutions, civil and foreign wars, blood, ruination, misery, and misfortunes.”

In 1852 the letrado historian and politician Lucas Alamán was also suspicious of modern politics, blaming Mexico’s ills on the excessive “innovations” introduced into the nation’s government, instead of maintaining tested colonial institutions.

Alamán and others worried that those pursuing a politically defined modernity—the American republicanism we will explore—would bring chaos to a society to which it was ill suited.

Before mid-century, a general sense of disillusionment with republicanism had solidified. A Uruguayan paper despaired at the caudillos and civil wars that dominated Spanish American politics. There was a general fear that any progress that had been achieved would quickly collapse with the rise of tyrants such as Rosas. Rosas and his ilk would “always invoke Republican principles” in pretty speeches but would govern as dictators; “this abuse of language” gave a republican façade to aristocratic or dictatorial policies.

Latin Americans had created “republics in form,” but not in reality. The Mexican politician and diplomat José Fernando Ramírez mocked the clubs and societies forming in Mexico in the 1840s as “no more than a farce and a parody of the meetings held by the English and the people of the United States.” As we shall see, opponents of American republican modernity regularly declared Latin American politics to be merely a pale reflection of true republican practices. Not everyone agreed that the failed constitutional experiments meant Latin America must imitate Europe; there was some sense that an indigenous system must develop, as proposed by the young Alberdi in 1837. More common, however, were laments about failure and collapse. Comercio del Plata declared “anarchy” and “despotism” thrived in Latin America under the rule of “false republics,” which existed only as “words” and not as a “system.” The paper urged readers to reject calls for monarchy but understood why “the republican faith of almost everyone will waver.”

In 1840 José María Gutiérrez Estrada famously proposed a European monarch as the solution to Mexico’s failed experiments with every version of republicanism: “democratic, oligarchic, military, demagogic, and
Conservatives found the 1848 revolutions in France particularly distressing, since they seemed to destroy the bedrock of civilization in its heartland. The *Gaceta de Guatemala* argued that it hardly mattered that France had been a monarchy, since it had an “admirable government.” For progress, it mattered less how a nation-state administered power than that it fostered civilization. The newspaper cited as a cautionary tale the Caste War of the Yucatan (a rebellion of the Maya that began in 1847): “The elements of civilization are few and weak; if these make war among themselves, they will weaken and have to succumb to the weight of the forces of barbarism.” Republicanism could become a threat to civilization; it mattered less than the preservation of order and elite society.

In Colombia, and to a lesser extent in Mexico, few people would openly embrace monarchy, but the public sphere endlessly debated what republicanism should mean. One contest concerned centralism versus federalism, with Alamán blaming the federal system for fomenting anarchy. Equally problematic was republicanism’s relationship with democracy. *El Observador de la República Mexicana* argued the two had no relation, as democracy was basically mob rule, while the “representative system” should represent the “public opinion” not of the majority (democracy), but of the educated few, as in any society with “civilization.” The salon must dominate the street. There was a sense that too much democracy would inevitably lead to tyranny. Rosas’s opponents claimed that he owed his support to the “proletariat” and the “mob.” Richard Warren argues that many Mexican elites thought the 1828 Parián riot represented “the inevitable culmination of the political enfranchisement of the urban poor.” The problem of the mass of people, and what role they would play not just in republican governance, but also in constructing the future, would be the central dilemma of cultural, republican, and Western modernity.

The Rampant Appetite of the People

In spite of being recast as a populist, Bolívar generally saw the increased participation of the poor as a threat and the pueblo’s lack of discipline as leading to anarchy, due to “the rampant appetite of a people who have broken their chains and have no understanding of the notions of duty and law.” The people were not ready for republicanism. The “masses” themselves might be “incapable of independent action,” but nefarious caudillos always rounded them up for the next revolution. Race underlay Bolívar’s and other elites’ fear of the masses.

The supposed racial threat in the new societies terrorized the elite, who
like Bolívar, saw new phantasmagorical Haitis spreading bloodshed and ru-
ination everywhere. Bolívar decried the situation in Mexico, where “a new class of barefoot poor” had taken over power and property. These poor were, of course, racially suspect. Bolívar described Vicente Guerrero as “a barbarian from the southern coasts, the vile miscarriage of a savage Indian woman and a ferocious African” and a “new Dessalines” (Jean-Jacques Dessalines was Haiti’s revolutionary ruler in 1804–6). Barbarism and savagery here are encoded as Indian, black, and provincial. The poor and racially mixed were a “ferocious hydra.” Bolívar predicted that eventually the “unrestrained multitudes,” composed of “all colors and races,” would tyrannize the Americas. Even later, when Liberals began to associate republicanism with modernity, many of them could not escape Sarmiento’s master trope that equated civilization with white cities and barbarism with the savage, multiracial countryside, in which ruled “the men of the forests.” When the Caste War of the Yucatan erupted, a Montevideoano paper declared it a contest of “barbarism, in its true personification, against an incomplete and weak civilization.” In Mexico, due to “bloody and barbarous war in the Yucatan,” elites feared that “the civilized race is about to disappear from the face of the earth, overrun by the immense horde of savages.” After independence, the greatest challenge to the nation was no longer external—European colonial powers—but an internal enemy, its own population.

In the 1820s two great fears concerning a pueblo perhaps racially unfit for civilization crystallized for elites: that the pueblo was too interested in politics and its antithesis, that the pueblo was completely uninterested in national life. Like Bolívar, letrados feared that the pueblo would be too interested in politics and not leave governance to their betters. Even the optimists, such as Sarmiento and the newspaper El Farol, worried that unruly plebes and their “disorder and turbulence” would derail the progress planned by the letrados. After all, El Farol argued, “only the wise and just man can possess true liberty,” and the paper urged support for a monarchy, making only cautious reforms to the colonial system, and providing only limited freedoms and rights: “Liberty, when abused, is as disastrous for men as slavery.” El Sol demanded a monarchy as necessary “to impose respect on the pueblo,” while republicanism would lead only to the “domination of the mob.” Yet letrados also fretted that the pueblo would have no interest in or knowledge of the new nation and would care only about the patria chica, the people and land in view from their village’s bell tower. In this vision, due to their ignorance and passivity, the pueblo had no knowledge of, interest in, or abilities to participate in national life.
people in Mexico had any sort of education, while the vast majority of the other seven and a half million did not “concern themselves with the interests of the nation.” The idea that the pueblo cared little about the nation would become a bedrock of letrado thinking and would dominate historical understanding of the nineteenth century until the 1990s (even if events later in the century proved it a self-interested elite fantasy).

However, for most elites, the more pressing concern was not that the pueblo declined to participate in national life, but that the pueblo was not educationally or culturally (or racially) prepared to participate rationally. The problem was not that the pueblo did not follow national affairs—indeed, a newspaper claimed that reading was more widespread among the poor in Mexico than in “more civilized nations”—but that the pueblo read the wrong type of material and took the wrong lessons from it. El Condor de Bolivia warned that the pueblo possessed “a poor understanding of the words Patria, sovereignty of the pueblo, liberty, equality,” which had caused “convulsions to such an extreme as to dissolve the governments” of other nation-states. The paper warned that the pueblo must understand that Bolivia would be a republic, not a democracy, which the paper equated with “savages in their tribes.” Instead, under the representative system, the pueblo’s only role was to elect its ruling politicians, after which “its influence is nothing,” and the pueblo must “do nothing more than obey.” Two decades later, Mexico’s El Siglo Diez y Nueve echoed this interpretation of republicanism: the pueblo’s only role was to elect representatives; after doing so, it must “blindly obey, with the most profound respect, the voice of the law.” This tension—between republicanism and democracy, between the elite leaders and the masses, and between the pueblo’s own interpretation of its rights and the desire of the powerful to discipline those below—would be constant throughout the nineteenth century.

How would the pueblo interpret liberty, equality, and fraternity? A few writers expressed optimism as long as the letrado class was able to exercise its mastery, opining that the poor needed only “good direction so that they do not stray” in their understanding of liberty. More, however, feared the people’s predilections. In 1827 El Observador de la República Mexicana warned of “demagogues” who would mislead the pueblo, which “never has known liberty.” Therefore, since the pueblo had broken the chains of despotic colonialism, it might as a consequence act to break “all the ties that bind it to authority, and to that necessary dependence that centuries of inequality of class has brought.” These demagogues thus deluded the pueblo into thinking a “chimerical equality” was possible and desirable. The terror
of a social upheaval along the lines of the French Revolution—sanculotismo—loomed large.\textsuperscript{113} Five years later, Los Amigos del Pueblo similarly argued that “our pueblo” possessed “a poor understanding of liberty” and that the pueblo’s presumptions, coupled with nefarious leaders, would lead ultimately to bloody scenes reminiscent of the Terror in France.\textsuperscript{114} El Genio de la Libertad added that the pueblo held “erroneous ideas” about the meanings of liberty, rights, and despotism. The paper attacked Santa Anna as one of the demagogues who misled the pueblo, undermining the idea that the educated classes should rule with his continual rhetorical salvos against “the aristocrats” who were the “enemies of the pueblo.”\textsuperscript{115} This would be a constant theme: the pueblo did not understand the true meaning of liberty.\textsuperscript{116}

Even worse, a nefarious notion of equality had spread through society. Instead of signifying “legal equality” as was proper, “they [the pueblo] have wanted to pass the level” over society, replacing “equality of rights” with “that of conditions.” Virtue would be the same as vice, ignorance as genius, poverty as wealth.\textsuperscript{117} Years later, another newspaper discussed the “absurd” notions of equality that many people held, leveling “the wise man” with the “ignorant.\textsuperscript{118} In 1832 El Genio de la Libertad begged for a stronger central government to control the mob, those wearing “the Jacobin cap” who preach “the insubordination of the people.”\textsuperscript{119} This was especially ironic, considering that the paper had a liberty cap on its masthead, showing the quick disillusion with popular sentiments of liberty (see figure 2.1).

The primal fear was not of an indifferent pueblo, but of an engaged pueblo. Indeed, as Marixa Lasso has argued for the independence period, politicians’ declarations of subalterns’ disinterest and inability to participate in national political life were not objective descriptions of reality, but biased arguments used to justify the exclusion of those below.\textsuperscript{120} During the period of American republican modernity, the public sphere sought to elide the problem by claiming that the pueblo was truly sovereign and should and could influence the state, and that the state truly represented the pueblo. As we will see, this strategy was immensely successful in granting legitimacy to the nation-state and incorporating many subalterns into the nation. The problem was that the pueblo insisted on making its own demands and defining liberty, equality, and sovereignty on its terms. This would lead to a reaction late in the century, which once again would restrict the pueblo from participating in public life by prioritizing order and discipline over political rights.

Although the restriction of citizenship rights later in the century would signal a tectonic shift in societies’ organization and political culture, the new
republics’ undefined nature gave elites more space to follow Europhile cultural modernity’s dictates and limit the masses’ citizenship. A quick survey across the Americas at this point shows that the institutional response to these fears was simple legal exclusion. Colombia’s constitutions of 1821, 1830, 1832, and 1843 required property or an income for citizenship, and all but that of 1843 explicitly excluded those who were day laborers or domestic servants (the property requirement of 300 pesos would deny them citizenship anyway). Under all the constitutions most elections were indirect, with citizens simply choosing electors who then selected the officeholders, and some important officers were appointed. After earlier experiments with more inclusive suffrage rights, in 1836 Mexican Centralists passed a national suffrage law that required an income of 100 pesos to vote and one of 1,500 pesos to hold office, while explicitly excluding domestic servants. Local politics could be even more exclusionary. Until 1832, the outgoing cabildo (town council) of Cali, Colombia, simply chose the next year’s officers, not even bothering with the pretense of elections. Alamán thought that only the wealthiest residents should serve in local assemblies. In 1830 in Ecuador, citizenship required 300 pesos of property or a profession or trade (domestic servants and laborers were excluded), and, most important, literacy. In Argentina, the province of Buenos Aires enjoyed at least technical universal adult male suffrage after 1821, but most of the other provinces required a profession or literacy. In Chile, renowned across Latin America at this time for its regular elections, the constitution required literacy, as well as property or income, with a moving scale that was adjusted every ten years.

These limitations of citizenship were truly an Atlantic phenomenon. In Europe, qualifications for citizenship tended to be even higher. In 1848 a
Mexican newspaper applauded the lifetime appointments and restricted eligibility for voting and service to the Papal States’ two councils. Before 1848, French voters in national elections needed to have paid 200 francs a year in property taxes. In Rouen in 1836, only 2.5 percent of the population were eligible to vote. In Great Britain—even after the Reform Act of 1832, which expanded the electorate by 80 percent—only 4.1 percent of the population could vote, and these figures exclude Ireland. In general, for elite Europeans, the period of the 1820s through the 1840s was one of “great social fear,” to quote Foucault. Attitudes were similar across the Americas as well, which is surprising given the harping on the supposed superiority of English colonial tutelage for instilling republicanism in the young United States. As in Latin America, the political class of the U.S. founding fathers assumed that gentlemen of education, civility, and talent would naturally lead, and Alexander Hamilton and others fretted over the democratic masses’ violence and turbulence. Before Jacksonian politics, U.S. elites still expected plebeians to display an appropriate deference. By 1830, a half-century after independence, eight out of twenty-four U.S. states still maintained a property requirement for citizenship, and fifteen excluded nonwhites. Echoing the debates in Latin America about who exactly would define democracy, in 1837 (after much more experience in these matters than more recently independent Latin Americans had), Noah Webster complained in a letter to William Stone: “The men who have preached these doctrines have never defined what they mean by the people, or what they mean by democracy, nor how the people are to govern themselves.” Indeed, the definition of civilization expressed by Latin American supporters of Europhile cultural modernity was little different from that expressed in the North Atlantic, where a Boston newspaper in 1818 worried that with the dispersal of the population across the frontier, and the ignorance and crudeness of life this entailed, the United States retrogressed: “The tendency is from civilization to barbarism.” In the period of Europhile modernity, Latin America lagged behind the United States in creating a more inclusive citizen body—but this is not the case if one compares Latin America of the 1820s and 1830s to the United States in the 1780s and 1790s, an equal number of years after it became independent. Of course, compared to Europe, Latin America was already at least an equal, if not far ahead. By the 1850s, many parts of Latin America would far surpass the United States and Europe in extending citizenship to all men, regardless of race or class. How the poor, especially those of African and indigenous descent, reacted to the possibilities and limitations created by independence is the subject of the
next section, and it is critical to understanding how later, under American republican modernity, subalterns often successfully appropriated citizenship and nation for themselves.


Let us briefly focus on Mexico in the years after independence to trace how subalterns sought to deal with both a new nation and a public sphere dominated by the language of Europhile cultural modernity. As with the enslaved women who appealed to Emperor Iturbide, as described in the introduction, subalterns eagerly seized any new political space, investing themselves with the status of a rights-bearing citizen. Even at the moment of national creation, when the very concepts of citizen, nation, and liberty were undefined, many subalterns rushed to test the boundaries of the new political systems that were replacing colonialism’s oppression. The legal dismantlement of the caste system seemed to signify immense positive changes for the vast majority of Latin America’s inhabitants. As we will explore, for Indians the new nation presented complex challenges, but for those of African descent, the caste system’s end was an unqualified boon. José Trinidad Martínez, a “native of Africa, born in Havana,” wrote to Iturbide in 1823 to claim his freedom from a master eager to return him to a hacienda. Unlike others, Martínez did not claim that his master had promised him emancipation, just that freedom was his right, now that “the sweet echo of liberty” was heard throughout the land. He argued that slavery was nothing more than holding one man a “prisoner” in spite of his having committed no crime and that Spain made people “slaves only by the domination of their government.” Now slavery would end: “With what delight, with what universal jubilee, have we celebrated the liberty that the Emperor declared in the Mexican Empire.” This declared liberty must signify abolition, for how could it be “that all the inhabitants of this vast continent were free and only I a slave, without any crime other than being a descendent of Africans”? Martínez asked that Iturbide order his master to free him, “restoring to me the rights that God, nature, and the nation have granted me.” Martínez assumed, logically, that the caste system’s end and the declarations of liberty from Spain would apply universally and thus necessitate a general emancipation. Afro–Latin Americans often embraced the new nations with fervor and joy, and as we will see, they were the strongest proponents of popular liberalism throughout the nineteenth century. Yet Martínez’s question—could he be left out of this liberty?—nagged and worried him as much as Indians would fret over their place in the new republics.
The petition above was not Martínez’s first letter; he had drafted another a few months earlier. Martínez was illiterate and could not sign his name, and the two documents were clearly written by different scribes. The earlier letter was in a large, blurry script, while the later was written in a small, neat hand (so delightful to historians). Yet each petition makes the same arguments. In the earlier petition, Martínez asserted that the mere existence of slavery “is opposed to and attacks the individual liberty of every citizen.” Furthermore, he declared that he had been enslaved “without having committed any crime other than to be black.” He assumed that Iturbide meant for slavery to be abolished, and that the only reason it had not been was that “in your vast dominion the vestiges of Spanish rule are maintained.” Finally, he claimed freedom as part of the “rights of man” that had been granted by “nature.” It is always easy to dismiss any document produced by a subaltern as inauthentic, reflecting the intent of the scribe or country lawyer who wrote it. Yet as these two letters show, the common denominator was not the scribes, but the slave Martínez. The content and discourse of petitions varied greatly, depending on the social situation of the supplicants. One might ask why Indians did not use the same soaring rhetoric of liberty that slaves employed, if lawyers had determined the content? The contrasts among petitions show that scribes alone cannot account for the strategies employed in subalterns’ demands. The vast body of evidence reveals that—contrary to the claims of past generations of historians and of some self-interested contemporaries—subalterns knew of, were interested in, and sought to take part in the life of the new nation-states. Martínez’s claims also reveal how quickly the rhetoric of the Atlantic Age of Revolution penetrated into the lower classes.

Yet few subalterns had Martínez’s confidence, even if they were equally eager to test the new regime’s intentions. Desiderio Antonio de Meza, “born a slave,” wrote to “Your Majesty Iturbide” in 1822 for help in obtaining the freedom that had been promised by his master. De Meza did not go so far as his female compatriots and claim citizenship, but he did ask for Iturbide’s “protection” as “father of all the unhappy.” The slave asked that Iturbide “allow him to enjoy his liberty, a good that the supreme Author of nature gave to every creature and only inhumanity and tyranny have tried to usurp.” Also in 1822, “Indians and others” from Tlaltenango, Zacatecas, complained of the local authorities, who “were resisters to the new system” and “enemies of order and liberty.” Indians from Maravatío, Michoacán, complained because local authorities were not allowing them to vote, keeping the “system of the old government” intact and ignoring the new constitutional system.
and their “right of citizenship.” However, in 1822 it was still very unclear who would be a citizen, whether all citizens would be equal, and what citizenship would mean. As the brief discussion of legal requirements above indicates, elites and the state would move to exclude most Indians and Afro–Latin Americans from citizenship due to their poverty or illiteracy. Eventually, many subalterns would have great success in claiming citizenship that was not legally theirs, forcing elites to redefine the institution. However, claiming rights and citizenship not legally recognized leads to recognition only under certain conditions. First, you can force the issue due to your own accumulation of power (either through armed insurgency or providing indispensable military support to elite leaders). This was the case only rarely in the early years of Mexico and Colombia. Second, your calls for citizenship and rights can resonate with the dominant, legitimating discourse of society. If a society declares that it is at the vanguard of human freedom, in which the pueblo is sovereign, it is hard to ignore that pueblo’s demands without creating a serious dissonance that weakens the legitimacy of the state, nation, and ruling class. However, if as in early Latin America, the dominant discourse of Europhile modernity declared the pueblo to be an ignorant, uncivilized mass that hindered progress and did not understand liberty, it is much easier to ignore the pueblo’s demands because doing so dovetails with the dominant discourse in the public sphere.

Certainly, subalterns tried to find a voice to which the new governing system would respond. In a petition about a land dispute with a nearby hacienda, the village of Santa Marta Chichihualtepec, Oaxaca, first celebrated the new political situation after independence: “We enjoy our complete liberty, shed of the yoke that had so much oppressed us everywhere.” The campesinos (country people, roughly) did not hesitate to flatter “Your Majesty Iturbide,” who had achieved independence for “all the inhabitants of America” and who only wanted the “complete happiness of his children.” They had traveled to Mexico City to celebrate Iturbide’s coronation and to seek justice against the “great tyranny” of the hacendado who had taken their land, stolen their livestock, and had them thrown in jail; in short, this local lord had abused “our rights.” They begged Iturbide to relieve them of the “miseries and indignities” they had suffered, and to act quickly because they were “dying of hunger at this court due to the lack of resources we have, as we only are eating some hard tortillas that we have brought.” The petitioners used a variety of strategies, old and new. They united traditional and colonial appeals for protection, citing their humble and lowly station and intense poverty. Yet they combined this with a new language of constitu-
tionalism, independence, and rights, which they cleverly associated with Iturbide, while linking a picture of colonial oppression and tyranny with the *hacendado*. These villagers were testing whether the new language of sovereignty, constitutionalism, and rights would mean anything for them. Subalterns would soon learn that it would not. Increasingly, as the power of Europhile modernity overwhelmed the initial optimism of independence, the new public discourse of republicanism and rights explicitly excluded subalterns.

Indigenous peoples were caught in a particularly vexing dilemma. Many, such as the villagers of San Miguel el Grande, Oaxaca, eagerly desired “to escape the oppression” they had suffered under “Spanish residents” who had usurped their land. However, to do this they needed to act in concert, using their Indian communities’ tested political and economic resources. We already saw how Afro-Mexicans were eager to exploit the possibilities engendered by the destruction of the colonial caste system. Indians had a more complicated and contradictory relationship to that system. The Indians of San Miguel were not even sure how to identify themselves in 1823, given the dismantling of the system, and they settled on “those who the Spanish government denominated indios.” However, they were sure that they wanted to continue to protect their communities, sending representatives (who were so poor they could only remain for a brief period) to Mexico City. When the community tried to raise more funds to pursue their case, the local mayor jailed the indigenous leader Juan Marcos Patlán for illegally collecting taxes from the indigenous community. Unsure of the legality of their traditional community governance, the Indians claimed the contributions were not taxes, but strictly voluntary. This stance typified their predicament. Did the new government consider them Indians or citizens, equals or subjects? As we will see in chapter 4, indigenous communities would seek to combine the categories of Indian and citizen in ways that subverted the assumptions of elites’ liberalism. Now, however, they struggled to find purchase for their claims—using complaints about their miserable condition, appeals to custom, and bargaining with the powerful—promising: “We are ready to sacrifice our lives in service . . . to the patria and to Your Majesty Iturbide.” These indigenous villagers held an intense interest in the new state and nation, but they proceeded cautiously, hoping to discover exactly how the state and nation felt about them.

Subalterns generally do not ignore the state and nation, as elites sometimes complained and as historians often assume, but try to influence it as best they can. Obviously, they prefer, as did Martinez and the enslaved
women who wrote to Iturbide, to do so from a position of dignity, strength, and inclusion as citizens. However, if this is impossible, they will use a rhetoric that fits the situation. In the 1820s in Mexico, we see that subalterns continued to use a colonial strategy of deference and submission, begging for protection from patriarchal authorities. They generally did not mention rights and citizenship, nor did they make outright demands as their due.\textsuperscript{146} Instead of demanding rights as citizens, many petitioners, describing themselves as “humble servants,” just begged the state or local authority to fulfill its “obligations.”\textsuperscript{147} In response to the petition and visit of the illiterate village officers from Tlanelhuayocan, Veracruz, national authorities reported that the visitors had begged for help and the return of stolen lands by emphasizing not their rights but their “great misery.”\textsuperscript{148} The indigenous village of San Damián, Tlaxcala, also petitioned for lands in a dispute with a hacienda, similarly citing “our poverty” and “our pressing misery.”\textsuperscript{149} The residents of another village wrote to Iturbide, placing themselves “under his protection” and pleading for access to water that a nearby hacienda had appropriated, leaving them “naked,” in a state of “misery and lack of food.” The villagers based their argument not on rights but on “customs.”\textsuperscript{150} The residents of an indigenous village in Oaxaca wrote to Iturbide, appealing to “his mercy and pity” for the “indigent class.” They were engaged in a land dispute with the Miraflores hacienda and admitted they could not prove that the land in question belonged to them, instead appealing to the long tradition of support they had under Spanish law and their “ancient privileges.” The Indians lamented how the hacendado had burned their houses and thrown their poor families into the forests. Finally, they tested the new monarch’s mettle, not by making any personal demands on him, but by subtly questioning his power: “Sir, will such criminal conduct remain unpunished?”\textsuperscript{151} Instead of demanding rights, they probed to see if older colonial norms still applied, to see if the new rulers would fulfill the same bargains that underlay the Spanish empire. In contrast, petitions from wealthier residents more often employed a language of citizenship.\textsuperscript{152}

These petitioners chose to deemphasize or omit calls for rights and expressions of political change, returning instead to tried-and-true strategies of pleading for protection with justifications based on customs or extreme suffering. They had to beg for a favor, not demand a right. Of course, many other subalterns would persist in using a language of national inclusion, rights, and citizenship.\textsuperscript{153} However, the power that language commanded in the public sphere was much reduced, as it did not call on the same themes as the dominant, legitimating discourse of Europhile modernity. The poor
could claim to be citizens and decry violations of their rights all they wanted, but the powerful could easily dismiss such claims as nonsense, without contradicting their own ruling ideology or exposing it as hypocrisy.

As long as Europhile cultural modernity saw the masses as generally unfit for civilization, and thus for citizenship, a discourse of rights found little purchase. However, Europhile modernity’s visions of degraded plebeians did create space for the miserable to entreat their civilized betters for aid. Of course, our knowledge of what subalterns really thought is limited, but we do know how they interpreted the public sphere’s limitations. The poor would always push to improve their political and social condition, but the public sphere, to which they played close attention, told them what strategies would be most successful. At times open revolt, so often doomed to failure, was the only option, especially for people totally excluded by society—be it the Maya of the Yucatan or the indigenous peoples of the northern deserts and plains. More often, popular groups listened and tried to figure out what strategies they could employ to fulfill their own agendas. Europhile modernity gave them very little space for maneuvering. Many subalterns simply retreated and guarded their patria chica as best they could (which is very different from not understanding or caring about the world beyond the view of the campanario). Others tried as best they could to position their demands in the spaces provided by Europhile modernity, which often meant appealing to the powerful’s elitist and racist visions. In a public sphere that regarded them as barbarians, there were few other options. As the public sphere’s vision of the world changed, slaves, Indians, artisans, and campesinos would be ready to claim the nation as their own.

The Failure of the Nation

While subalterns struggled to claim a place in the new nations, by the 1840s elites and letrados seemed ready to abandon the national project altogether, the public sphere ringing with declarations that Mexico had failed to become a civilized nation. The president of the Chamber of Deputies, Luis Gonzaga Solana, declared in 1845: “One doubted if we belonged to this century’s civilization and if we were deserving of liberty, observing that for so long a time, like the degraded and vile pueblos of Asia, we were governed without any laws, without any rules nor principles, than that of the sultanic will and blind caprice of an unchecked ambition.” Conditions had deteriorated so far in Mexico that a politician could openly question whether Mexico even belonged in the family of civilized nations. As war with the United States loomed, Conservatives began to push openly for reestablishing a throne,
declaring monarchy a rational system adopted by Europe’s “most civilized countries.” Newspapers published in Mexico by the Spanish expatriate community encouraged equating civilization and monarchy, claiming that in “modern Europe” the people loved their princes for the well-being they provided. Articles began to appear that stressed how a monarchy would extend many of the same rights, while providing a bulwark against disorder. The 1846 U.S. invasion of Mexico would bring the most vociferous denunciations of the Mexican national project’s stagnation in the race to civilization.

Most Mexicans understood the U.S. success in the war as a result of their own failed political institutions, due in part to an un governed pueblo. Therefore, monarchy might well be the answer (as proposed by El Universal in particular). Others expressed shock at the lack of national identity that allowed the pueblo to stand idly by while the gringos invaded. Ramírez argued that although generally in world history foreign invasions strengthened feelings of nationality, in Mexico “quite the contrary has happened.” Yet Ramírez contradicted himself, for he also feared that the pueblo might use the destruction caused by the war to erect on the country’s ruins an “empire of Liberty: in other words, that of outright democracy.” He thought the pueblo envisioned this democracy as “abolishing all the landed proprietors and other privileged classes.” It is easy to dismiss words like “liberty” and “democracy” as empty concepts debated in salons, with no importance in the fields and workshops of Latin America, but Ramírez and his ilk knew this was not the case. He knew the power of this discourse and feared the pueblo’s appropriation of it. Thus, Europhile modernity had to limit the pueblo’s role in creating civilization, by looking to Europe and the high culture represented by the letrado class. Elites reserved the right to invest liberty with a meaning to their liking. In spite of complaining about the pueblo’s lack of interest in and unwillingness to sacrifice for the survival of an elite-controlled nation-state, what Ramírez and many others truly feared was that the lower and middle classes would claim liberty and democracy, and even Mexico itself, as their own.

The U.S. invasion only increased elites’ desperation over the problem of the pueblo. After the war, El Siglo Diez y Nueve warned that if Mexico did not embrace “order and civilization,” then “before long our very nationality will disappear.” The paper looked to Europe for civilization, in the form of immigrants. When it gained its independence, Mexico had seemed called to a great destiny; now other nations looked on Mexico with disdain. The war, above all else, marked the “failure of the nation.” Alamán similarly
lamented the “complete extinction of public spirit that has caused any idea of national character to disappear.”¹⁶⁶ Instead of accompanying the rest of the world in making “giant strides on the path of progress,” Mexico did not just remain in place, stagnant and abject, but “even moves backwards.”¹⁶⁷ The question was not if Mexico was modern—according to these thinkers, it clearly was not—but if Mexico had even the hope of one day pursuing modernity. Perhaps Mexican society was simply doomed to backwardness and barbarism.

El Siglo Diez y Nueve concluded that “all the misfortunes that our patria has suffered” were due to the pueblo and its lack of education. The nation would never be able to progress with a republican and democratic system unless it could teach the pueblo its rights and duties and instill in them a love of order. Now, however, due to democracy, the pueblo followed only bad men, a course that led to revolution and anarchy.¹⁶⁸ Since the “mass of more than half of our population” had no investment in the nation and no understanding of “liberty,” the paper argued that it was “a pueblo unfit to live among civilized nations.”¹⁶⁹ Mexico had fallen to the wayside in its race to modernity—largely, many in the letrado class claimed, due to the failure of its non-European, ignorant, and backward people.

The problem of the pueblo had culminated with the failure of the nation, the vehicle for modernity in the nineteenth-century world. A letter written by “various Mexicans” in early 1848 encapsulates our themes thus far. Surveying the wreckage of the war, the writers declared: “In Mexico there has not been and there is not now that which one calls national spirit, because the nation does not exist.” They lamented that in spite of Mexico’s abundant natural wealth, society was very weak due to the masses’ lack of education and the resulting poor government. They argued that “a nation is nothing but a great family . . . united by links of interests and by heartfelt affections” (an imagined community, if you will). However, the writers declared it impossible that Mexico could become such a nation, due to the “diverse classes that make up our degraded society.” Factional politics and civil wars had destroyed the order of the colonial era. The best solution would be to improve the pueblo, but even though Mexico counted three million people of at least some European ancestry, the majority of these were illiterate. Far worse, four million Indians—who “in their semi-savage state hardly can be considered part of society”—made up the majority of the population. The writers were not Conservatives, since they held the clergy and Spanish colonialism for this ignorance. The only way to improve the pueblo would be to encourage foreign immigration. Then society could slowly reclaim the state
from the agents of anarchy. Of course, the writers looked to Europe and the United States for other answers, warning that if worst came to worst, they might have to succumb to one of the “European monarchs.” Republicanism, the nation, the people, and even modernity had all failed: “This country and its population does not belong in any manner to the civilized world.” Bolívar’s predictions seem to have come true. However, the vision of modernity dominant in the public sphere would evolve both dramatically and quickly. As we saw in Uruguay, by the 1840s, many in the public sphere had begun to challenge the tenets of Europhile cultural modernity—especially the ideas that Europe was the font of modernity and must be imitated, that civilization was best measured by the adoption of European high culture, and that, therefore, the masses were barbarians unfit for political life. As we will explore in the subsequent chapters, by the 1850s Europhile modernity rapidly waned in its influence in the public sphere, jostling for position, mostly unsuccessfully, with American republican modernity. Yet even at those times and places when we might call American republican modernity hegemonic, such as Mexico after Maximilian’s defeat or Colombia during Liberal rule after 1860, many of Europhile modernity’s basic tenets that we explored in this chapter remained powerful among the members of one exclusive club: the letrados. Even if not heard in political debates, campaign speeches, public festivals celebrating independence, or newspaper columns, Europhile modernity never disappeared in the private libraries and salons of the most wealthy and educated, and in many ways it remained the letrados’ dominant ideology, misleading historians and cultural theorists to this day. However, while this gloomy picture dominated the letrado class and most of the public sphere through the 1840s, even in the darkest days there was a countercurrent that imagined American republics as creating progress. Furthermore, in only a few years this radically different vision of republicanism, nation, and modernity would emerge from being a dismissed alternative to rule the public sphere. The vision of the pueblo as unfit for civilized life would radically change under American republican modernity, which would see in the pueblo—in particular, a racially mixed pueblo—the bedrock of a New World civilization of sister republics that would challenge Europe and redefine the future of the world.