The Vanguard of the Atlantic World

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In 1860 El Ferrocarril of Chile complained of Europeans’ continued assertions of dominance and superior civilization (and many elite Americans’ acceptance of those views), demanding: “Where is our inferiority?” The paper argued that Europe was built both on an “ancient lie—the divine right of kings—and now on a brand new sophism—constitutional monarchy.” Therefore, because of republicanism, the Americas enjoyed a “decisive superiority” over Europe. The New World had already progressed further down the road of modernity and civilization than had Europe: “America, throwing off the iron collar of colonialism, already has completed the great revolution, the great transformation, the grand execution of the past,” while Europe still suffered monarchs and caudillos. Finally, the essayist asserted that the influence of America would spread to Europe, as “democracy will destroy current European society.”¹ This article encapsulated the two central tropes of a new vision of modernity that came to dominate the Spanish American public sphere after mid-century. First, the Americas, not Europe, formed the vanguard of the future, “the vanguard of civilization.”² Second, the primary definition of civilization was now political: democracy and republicanism represented the future, while monarchy signified the past. The New World no longer needed to pine after the high culture of the Old. Indeed, Europe must now look to America, because the continuing American
revolutions would soon overwhelm Old World hierarchies and traditions. Modernity would emanate from the Americas to transform the world as a whole.

What I call American republican modernity was a fluid, though coherent, way of envisioning the race to civilization that so obsessed nineteenth-century societies. I will begin by examining the two key tropes mentioned above: the locus of modernity—now imagined in the New rather than the Old World—and its essential nature, now seen as political rather than cultural. I will then uncover some of the finer points of this vision regarding universalism, imperialism, colonialism, nation, and race. I will next explore how this discourse conceived of subalterns, and—more important—how it nourished quotidian practices of democratic republicanism in Mexican and Colombian societies. Then I will suggest how subalterns used aspects of American republican modernity and this new political space to further their own agendas. Finally, I will conclude by uncovering some of the tensions and contradictions within American republican modernity—even the problem of economic development—that foreshadowed the collapse of that discourse’s near hegemony by the last quarter of the century.

We have seen that many of the key aspects of American republican modernity had already appeared in Uruguay in the 1840s, challenging the dominance of Europhile cultural modernity. In this chapter, we will focus mostly on Colombia and Mexico; American republican modernity commanded the public sphere by the 1850s in the former and the 1860s in the latter. Why at these times? Although the discourse was not limited to Liberals, they were its greatest proponents; therefore, the rise of American republican modernity is tightly linked to Liberals’ ascension in both countries. In Mexico, Liberals came to power in 1855 after the Revolution of Ayutla (1854–55) deposed the caudillo Antonio López de Santa Anna. They instituted a sustained program to remake Mexico society called La Reforma (The Reform), which sought a radical break with the colonial past—represented by the Church, a corporate and caste ordering of society (including indigenous villages), and monarchy. Liberals instead embraced a future based on liberal republicanism, imagining a nation of rights-bearing citizens and individual, rational economic actors. However, Conservatives rabidly opposed such changes, rebelling in the War of the Reform (1857–61). After suffering defeat, Conservatives turned to Europe, allying themselves with an invading French army and inviting Maximilian to assume the throne of Mexico. This alliance instigated a long, bloody international and civil war (the French Intervention) from 1862 to 1867, which ended with the Liberals
triumphant under President Benito Juárez and Maximilian dead. In Colombia, Liberal rule began earlier, when José Hilario López won the presidency in 1849, and lasted longer, but it was equally contested by Conservatives, who failed to take power in an 1851 rebellion but succeeded in 1854 due to divisions among Liberals. In turn, Liberals launched their own successful rebellion from 1859 to 1862. They ruled until the 1880s, withstanding a major conservative rebellion in 1876–77. In both Mexico and Colombia, Liberals enacted numerous reforms that ended special legal privileges for the Church and armies, restricted corporate ownership of property (aimed at the Church’s economic power and indigenous villages’ assumed economic isolation), enacted federalism, reduced monopolies, abolished slavery (this had already been accomplished in Mexico), extended citizenship to all adult males, and passed constitutions guaranteeing a wide array of rights (freedoms of speech, press, association, to bear arms, and to petition). In a speech remembering the heady days of 1848, the Colombian Senator (and former president) Tomás Mosquera recalled how he had been asked to join the newly minted Conservative Party. He had demurred, noting how Conservatives in Europe maintained “the monarchical tradition,” whereas he, though sympathetic to many Conservative ends, believed in “progress.” In both Colombia and Mexico, Liberals would imagine Conservatives as tied to Europe, while they, along with their brothers across the Americas, would reform the world, forging a new modernity.

The Land of Democracy Versus the Land of Tyranny and Human Degradation

In the dusty provincial town of Chihuahua in 1868, a crowd that had gathered to celebrate Mexico’s independence listened as an unremarkable orator made a very remarkable assertion about the origin and spread of modernity in the nineteenth-century world: “The Eagles of American democracy, crossing the Atlantic, will import into the Old World the modern doctrines of political association, thereby emancipating those peoples.” The speech, made in the context of Mexico’s victory over Maximilian and his French army, celebrated the restoration of a republic in Mexico. The speaker, Manuel Merino, equated this transformation with modernity, while assuming this modern system’s influence would eventually spread across the Atlantic to a Europe still ruled by monarchies, equated with the past. Merino, addressing the residents of an isolated and remote province of Mexico, asserted a key component of American republican modernity that had become commonplace by the late 1860s: modernity—which he defined as “American
democracy”—would emanate from the New World to transform the civilization of the Old.

The inexorable current of modernity that defined the nineteenth century had shifted across the Atlantic. Since modernity had emerged as a concept in the late eighteenth century, it had always been seen as occurring right now or in the near future (at least somewhere). However, Europhile cultural modernity had looked to Europe’s high culture—in a sense, to past achievements. For American republican modernity, the nineteenth century was the moment of progress. There was little doubt that the nineteenth century, “this luminous century,” was a unique period that would usher in the modern age.6 In Cañete, Peru, Federico Flores declared that “the nineteenth century, the century of enlightenment, the century of progress and civilization, belongs to America; retrograde Europe must give way, as in the past Asia gave way.”7 Europe could not join this movement because monarchy belonged to the past, the Middle Ages. A provincial Colombian politician, condemning a rumored attempt to establish a monarchy in Ecuador, noted that monarchy was a form of government that “the century has rejected.”8 The nineteenth century—in the words of Juárez, “the first century of the pueblos”—belonged to the Americas.9

While youth and the spirit of the age found a home in America, Europe seemed old and the cradle of the dark past. The professor, essayist, and dramatist Gabino Ortiz, speaking to the Morelia National Guard in 1862, mocked: “The decrepit nations of Europe, the rotten thrones of their sickly dynasties, the rancid and strange institutions that rule them, all feel the convulsions of their final agony. In order to distract themselves from the frightening spectacle of a past from which they flee, from a present that escapes them, and from an inevitable future, they turn their sights on young America, object of their envy, hatred and insatiable greed.”10 Addressing perhaps four thousand men, Ortiz assumed this modernity would happen in “young America,” a discourse powerfully resonant in the public sphere.11 Youth, a weakness under Europhile cultural modernity, became the American republics’ great strength, ready to foment and inculcate modernity, while Old Europe clung to the past and its worm-eaten traditions.

Indeed, European influence no longer carried civilization, as cultural modernity had assumed, but rather transmitted the fatal malaria of past decay. Instead of bringing civilization, Juan Cervin de la Mora claimed in a speech to artisans, the European invasion of Mexico would only “regress us to the times of horror and barbarism.”12 American republicanism associated feudalism and the Inquisition with Europe, the origin of the “fanaticism” that
New World societies struggled to destroy.\textsuperscript{13} When Spain invaded Mexico in 1862 (a prelude to the French Intervention), \textit{La Guerra} mocked the Spanish pretension to bring “the inquisition, the cowl, and stocks” back to Mexico; such Old World “fanaticism” was inappropriate in the century of enlightenment.\textsuperscript{14} \textit{La Bandera Nacional} staunchly rejected Europhilia, smugly deriding those Conservatives who “endlessly repeat, with a childish mien, that all of Europe is superior to America, above all, the educated and the soldiers.”\textsuperscript{15} \textit{La Opinión Nacional} argued that “European enlightenment is more words than deeds.” The paper recognized that Mexico still did not enjoy some European material successes, but instead it had “our triumphant democracy,” which had far surpassed Old World accomplishments.\textsuperscript{16} The contrast with the origin of progress under Europhile cultural modernity could not be starker.

As we will explore in the next section of this chapter, the reason the Americas advanced while Europe stagnated was political, specifically the adoption of republicanism and democracy in the New World. When the French invaded Mexico, a Guadalajarense paper argued that Mexico “represents the interests of the New World, land of democracy, combating the interests of the Old World, land of tyranny and human degradation.”\textsuperscript{17} \textit{La Chinaca} declared that democracy’s future lay in the Americas: “Today we defend the banner of the democratic idea” against European tyrants; thankfully, “God has placed the Atlantic between the two continents as the distance between Heaven and Hell.”\textsuperscript{18} \textit{El Monitor Republicano} declared: “The democratic republic is the natural government of America, just as monarchy is natural to Europe and the most stupid tyranny has extended its roots throughout Asia and Africa.”\textsuperscript{19} America was the future: it enjoyed a democratic, republican system of government, while the rest of the world dwelled, to a greater or lesser degree, under despotism.

Returning to Peru, we find that Federico Flores described the race to civilization, and the divide between Europe and America, in historical terms. America began to gain in the race with the independence of the United States, followed by that of the South American nations: “Democracy triumphed.” Since then, America had taken the lead: “The Old World has sunk and will sink further into decadence; it continues converting its proverbial culture and progress into nothing but ruins; this has come to pass because those states do not have republican governments.” Meanwhile, American republics, following the law and “the will of the people,” were “every day moving closer to the apex of civilization.” Perhaps Europe once held a claim on modernity, but no longer. And, unlike Europe, America would not retrogress as France had after its revolution, degenerating from republic to monarchy.\textsuperscript{20}
Europe had tried to achieve modernity—with the French Revolution—but the forces of retrogression had triumphed. The rioplatense-born Héctor Varela had a similar, if chronologically deeper, historical understanding; writing from Paris, he had founded El Americano to introduce Europe to the true progress of “Latin America.” He argued that the rise of New World societies marked the end of the “Middle Ages” in which Europe and Christianity were champions of civilization. Now, however, the Americas had progressed beyond Europe in their adoption of “the democratic doctrine,” liberty, rights, and state institutions, but most especially “the Republic,” which was “the definitive form of our spirit.” Varela asserted: “Taking this point of view, one can say that the New World is the most potent incarnation of the modern spirit.” The New World was modern, and if Europe would listen, it could learn valuable lessons to help bring about “universal democracy.”

The modern world’s genesis was in Latin America. “Decrepit Europe retrogresses in all parts,” the professor and diplomat Jesús Escobar y Armandáriz argued, adding that “we are heading toward a universal Republic” that had already been achieved in Mexico and much of Latin America, even if Hungary, Poland, and Italy were still struggling against despotism in Europe. The New World was now civilization’s best hope. Dipesh Chakrabarty argues that outside of Europe, modernity is always imagined as something that happens elsewhere, an argument echoed by some Latin Americanists—one of whom declares that nineteenth-century Spanish Americans always felt modernity flowered “somewhere else.” Such a sentiment would have seemed to belong to only the most conservative or Europophilic letrado in 1860s Mexico or Colombia. On the contrary, the Chilean Francisco Bilbao understood that civilization was not a fixed concept; he proposed that there was a vast struggle between “American civilization against European civilization.” Bilbao proclaimed that Europe had now declined due to its monarchies, imperialism, and its lack of true liberty and justice; it would have to wait for American influence to incite republican revolutions if it hoped to progress once again.

Americans did not just assume that their societies no longer blindly received civilization from Europe, but they also declared that American modernity would transform Europe. Indeed, this idea that the new Latin American republics might be a threat to Europe had appeared occasionally by the 1840s (as in Uruguay), but it would become a powerful trope throughout the subsequent decades. In Mexico, El Republicano criticized the editors of El Tiempo, who had promoted monarchism by arguing that it was the government of “the most civilized and liberal countries of Europe.” El Republicano
countered that the New World had its own destiny and that its republics were the future: “The American continent is called, by its nature, to be the complete antithesis of the Old World.” Those who discredited the republican system hoped to reintroduce monarchy, which would serve European interests since “the thrones that exist there do not want to see even one flourishing republic in the world,” because that might incite their own people to rebel and establish republics. Spanish America’s revolutions and wars were not negative in this reading (as they were under Europhile modernity) because they had engendered republican modernity; instead, the lack of revolution marked Europe as backward.

By the 1850s no hesitancy remained for many in Colombia concerning the Americas’ future. In 1852 President José Hilario López warned of a monarchical project in Ecuador, Colombia, and Peru. This plot was an attempt to destroy the “democratic Republics” that had vanquished the colonial, monarchical system and had launched Nueva Granada (Colombia) down the “path of progress.” For López, Nueva Granada was a shining light in the Atlantic world, proving that “liberal institutions are not the privilege of one race.” He was confident that the “strength of public opinion” supported republicanism, but he warned of the nefarious dealings of those proposing “ultramontanism” and “Europe’s cause of retrocession.” López’s speech to Congress, subsequently distributed throughout Bogotá as a broadside, encapsulates our themes thus far. The public understood Republicanism was the path to progress. However, dangerous opponents—American Conservatives and European dynasties—wanted to destroy Spanish American republics’ powerful examples, lest their influence triumph universally.

The challenge to Europe found its most forceful enunciation in Mexican society during and after the French Intervention (1862–67). In this era, Mexican Liberals not only asserted that the Americas were more modern than, and would influence, Europe; they also claimed that American republicanism was a direct threat to the backward European status quo. When the French invaded in 1862, El Voto del Pueblo claimed: “Luis Napoleon has made war on us because he fears America, because he hates republics, and because he sees in Mexico democracy and La Reforma made real.” If Mexico “had stayed in a state of barbarism and fanaticism” and had not “transformed itself through La Reforma and launched itself toward a future of progress and liberty; if [Mexico] had not adopted as dogma the sovereignty of the pueblo and exposed as a lie and sarcasm the divine right of kings,” then Napoleon III would not have needed to invade. Here barbarism is explicitly linked with colonialism and monarchy. Mexico was not blindly re-
ceiving modernity from Europe and imitating it, or even developing its own modernity apart from Europe; with victory, Mexico would bring modernity to Europe, which would imitate the Americas. In 1871 El Aguijón mocked France for still being ruled by a monarch as laughable as Napoleon III, calling him “the Jester of the Tuileries.” Mexican papers predicted the French pueblo would soon awaken from its slumber and inspired by “our 57”—La Reforma, in other words—would execute another monarch to initiate a modern future. Critics of modernity have applauded twenty-first-century historiography for dismantling the totalizing claims of European modernity (which some assume non-Europeans accepted in the past), but I contend that nineteenth-century Latin Americans had already dismantled Europe’s claims to modernity and its power to define barbarism. Nineteenth-century historical actors were provincializing Europe long before postcolonial scholars’ theoretical contortions.

Although most of this discourse assumed republicanism in general threatened the ancien régime, Juan González Urueña, writing from Morelia, explicitly focused on equality. He argued that European monarchs feared “the spread of, as much in the Old World as the New, the ideas of republican equality and political and religious liberty, all of which are undermining slowly but surely their thrones’ support.” If allowed to spread, such ideas would eventually destroy Old World monarchies. As we will explore in the next chapter, the French Intervention in Mexico was seen as only part of a larger project to eradicate the contagion of New World republics, including the United States, for which Mexico would be a base from which to support the aristocratic Confederacy in the U.S. Civil War. Therefore, “the cause of Mexico is the cause of the American continent; what’s more, it is the cause of humanity.” The Atlantic world was a vast arena in which the forces of equality, enlightenment, and republicanism confronted those of aristocracy, superstition, and monarchy. Yet by staking the justification for American defense on equality, Mexican elite republicans established in the public sphere a notion that subalterns could easily seize and exploit. Equality was a threat to both European thrones and members of the Latin American ruling class and the incipient capitalist development that they hoped to foment.

Equality, liberty, fraternity, and universal democracy had become particularly American values. As the French Intervention loomed, La Guerra had stressed fraternity among the peoples of the earth as monarchs’ greatest fear. The paper argued the French had invaded so “that in the New World, liberty’s endeavors to conquer the sacred rights of humanity will be sterile in their results, because thrones tremble when democracy moves to realize
the pueblos’ destiny, universal fraternity.”37 Once the American republican system had toppled these European thrones, “in their place will arrive the rule of Enlightenment and liberty, the happy reign of universal democracy. This is humanity’s destiny.”38 Although Europe had previously influenced America, Chile’s El Independiente argued, “the current is entirely changed. American civilization works visibly and powerfully on Europe’s pueblos.”39

The flow of modernity had reversed, now following the Gulf Stream from the New World to the Old.

I suspect many readers from the North Atlantic will quickly dismiss this rhetoric as empty boasting. For our purposes, I am most interested in this discourse’s importance within Spanish American societies. However, it bears noting that Spanish Americans’ claim to influence the Old World does not lack logic. It is easy to mock the conspiratorial paranoia of Francisco Bilbao, who in 1864 claimed that European monarchs plotted against American republics: “We now know the ancient and secret pacts of their diabolical alliances to do away with all the Republics in the world.”40 Yet it is also true that almost all the world’s republics were in the Americas, and if republicanism was a threat to monarchies, as the monarchs certainly believed it was, then the Americas were the last, best hope of republican values. The Americas kept republicanism alive and meaningful at a time when it had all but disappeared in the Old World. It is beyond this study’s scope to prove American influence on Europe. However, such an effort, requiring serious studies of republicanism’s diffusion, will be undertaken only once Spanish America’s importance in democratic and republican innovation is not summarily dismissed.

Political Modernity: The Inextinguishable Volcano of Democratic Ideas

As the fusillades against Europe attest, Mexicans and Colombians were redefining not just the locus of modernity but also its meaning, privileging a political definition of civilization. By the 1850s, American republican modernity had flowered in full in Colombia. The Liberal Party had come to power in 1849 and adopted numerous political reforms, including universal male suffrage and a long list of rights for citizens, regardless of class or color.41 Colombian elites did not just imagine themselves as mere followers of Atlantic political currents; rather, they saw themselves as in “the vanguard in America”—along with other New World republics, including the United States—in creating modern political systems.42 Bogotá’s El Neogranadino declared that “we are not behind, but rather in front of the movement of universal civilization.”43 Popayán’s La Unión thought Colombia was in the
vanguard, as it had established “the will of the pueblo” superior to all other powers and eliminated every “hierarchy” (including that of race) and “element of repression” from society. The New World represented progress and the future in the Atlantic world; the Old World, even including prosperous England, was aged, tired, decadent, monarchical, beset by violence, and weighed down by the feudal past.45

American republican modernity regularly assumed that a retrograde feudalism had reigned in colonial and early postindependence Spanish America, until the adoption of effective republicanism. Before the arrival of the midcentury liberal reforms, Belisario Zamorano described the nineteenth-century Cauca region as stuck in “the tyranny of the Middle Ages.” Indeed, monarchy was regularly equated with a barbaric past. Juan de Dios Restrepo, writing from Buga, evoked the clash of civilizations—European monarchy versus American republics: “The situation of America is dire; the fight is between the colonial system and the modern liberal spirit, between the paganism of the Roman priests and the evangelical Christian idea, between those who dream of reestablishing slavery, privilege, monarchy, theocracy and those who believe that all of those abominations should remain in Europe.” Republican modernity in the Americas was thus contrasted with European backwardness, characterized by slavery, aristocracy, and monarchy. American modernity centered on republican politics and its associated political ideas—liberty, equality, fraternity, rights, and democracy. Republicanism had replaced wealth, urbanity, and European high culture as the accepted definitions of modernity in the Colombian (and in much of the wider Spanish American) public sphere.

Francisco Bilbao summed up this vision of “civilization” that I call American republican modernity as one that respected the “integrity of human rights, in politics, religion and society.” He directly rejected definitions of civilization that privileged concepts of “utility, of wealth, of beauty.” Speaking for all Americans, he declared: “We reject such civilization—that is, the civilization that old Europe represents.” Thus Bilbao denied the central construction of civilization under Europhile cultural modernity, mocking those who “confuse civilization with fashion.” However, he also refused to accept new material definitions of modernity coming from the North Atlantic, arguing that science, industry, and commerce did not represent civilization and warning that it was “despots and tyrants” who now bragged about their steamships, railroads, telegraphs, machinery, and fancy palaces as signs of modernity. He declared that railroads built to carry slaves, telegraphs used to organize repression, and palaces built by the poor to honor
kings were not marks of modernity, but rather of backwardness. Europe had tried to seduce America with “the tripartite prestige of its science, its power and its wealth,” but America had stuck fast to the “idea of the Republic,” representing “the victory of the modern idea.”

Thus, American republican modernity was in a long-running contest both with older visions of Europhile cultural modernity and newer visions of Western modernity emerging from the North Atlantic. Bilbao, like others, directly rejected both. We have already seen how in Uruguay there was a sense that while “European civilization” involved palaces, fashion, opera, and wealth, civilization was also defined by a society’s success in establishing an order based on “free men” who supported “liberty, equality, [and] humanity.” In a speech in 1864 in Chihuahua, Mexico, Carlos Pacheco dismissed Europhile modernity’s longings. Such things as “ridiculous courtiers and their ceremonies” and “their pompous titles of nobility,” which had once defined civilization in the Atlantic world, now only marked Europeans as backward. Under cultural modernity, wealth and European luxury were the marks of civilization. In contrast, under American republicanism tales of European opulent hotels, splendid carriages, grand balls, and “Oriental luxury” were marked as wasteful, backward, and corrupting, more akin to an imagined stagnant Asian despotism than to American republican progress. With France’s invasion of Mexico, the distinction between wealth and politics as modernity’s markers was clear. Referring to the invasion, Colombian President Mosquera declared that his country was prepared “to defend the republican system at all costs, preferring the liberty of the savage in our forests to slavery in gilded palaces.”

Ultimately, much more challenging to American republicanism than the older cultural ideas were the new visions of Western modernity coming from the North Atlantic that privileged state power, military force, technology, science (and scientific racism), commerce, and industrialization. Eventually, as we will explore in chapter 7, this vision would triumph in Latin America. However, immediately after midcentury, the Mexican and Colombian public spheres’ conception of modernity still downplayed economic, technological, and cultural accomplishments in favor of moral and political benchmarks. Facing a Europe intent on imposing its civilization on Mexico, the physician Carlos Santa María directly rejected “European progress”—defined for him by steamship, canals, railroads, industry, arts, and sciences—arguing instead that “the true happiness of social life consists in enjoying liberty and independence.” “The comforts of material life,” order, and “respect for property” that Europe offered carried too high a price: “degrading
slavery.”56 Similarly, Severo Cosío, formerly governor of Zacatecas, thought that the French could not offer modern liberty or rights, but only “progress of a dazzling and corrupt materialism.”57 France “wants a monopoly of commerce, [and] the superiority of races to change the destiny of the New World, which is the home and haven of the human species and of democracy.”58 This vision recognizes Europe as having achieved economic development and increased state and technological power, but at the cost of monopolies, racism, and the repression of democracy.

Europe’s imperial aggressions especially forced Spanish Americans to consider the relation between power and modernity; as state and military power emerged as a key trope of modernity in the North Atlantic, Spanish Americans directly rejected it. El Constitucional argued that when Europe would come with its cannons and warships to bombard Mexico’s ports, “we will answer them via the transatlantic cable with one word: ‘Democracy.’”59 Another writer argued: “It is not with cannons that you introduce or foment civilization. . . . Civilization relies on another class of moral force, which illuminates and carries human fraternity to the ends of the earth.”60 Mexico City’s El Globo encapsulated these themes: Europe (and even the U.S. North) thought their warships and newly engineered rifles “the best expression of human progress,” while Mexico, suffering “the lances of empire” of an invading France, insisted that its “republican virtue” and democratic constitution best defined nineteenth-century civilization.61

Furthermore, Europe’s political backwardness would eventually undermine its material successes, since its oppressed masses would one day rise up and destroy the palaces, factories, and railroads that European elites erroneously believed made them modern. Although Europe might have “material progress and artificial wealth,” these were only the “tinsel of civilization” that states used to distract from “the masses’ misery.” European monarchs’ rejection of “popular sovereignty” since 1789, and the continued immiserization of the masses this entailed, meant that “the inextinguishable volcano of democratic ideas” would continually erupt in Europe. As long as the war raged between the “old regime and the pueblo’s aspirations,” Europe would continually endure bloodshed and the majority of its inhabitants would be condemned to poverty.62 As La Unión noted, by incorporating the masses into politics, Colombia would prevent the kinds of internecine class struggle seen in Europe, where “the rights of man are not recognized.”63 This judgment of Europe makes clear that wealth was only a false measure of civilization; democratic politics was the only true yardstick.

I am not arguing that American republican modernity did not value lo-
comotives, telegraphs, and steam-powered factories, but that it saw them more as the eventual product of a republican modernity than as part of its essential character. Political liberty was American republican modernity’s key aspect; once this was obtained, other aspects of civilization—economic and cultural—would follow. In a speech celebrating independence, Máximo Castañeda declared that as a consequence of Mexico having established liberal republicanism, and “the sacred principles of equality and universal reform,” peace and material progress would follow. Similarly, a Uruguayan paper argued that the U.S. political system “is the true font of the prosperity that country has obtained.” Political modernity would engender economic progress; economic progress without political modernity was unstable, ultimately hollow, and doomed to fail. After 1870 many Liberals would abandon this calculus, deciding that political modernity did not engender economic development but, rather, actively hindered it.

In Colombia in the 1850s, however, politics still led to the future. When the radical Liberal Ramón Mercado described the liberal reforms that would lead to “civilization” and progress, his lengthy list consisted almost entirely of political accomplishments concerning extending rights and liberties: the abolition of slavery, granting freedom of expression, ending monopolies, creating a government that followed “public opinion,” and allowing citizens greater participation in the judiciary. In general, these reforms undid the work of previous governments that had represented the “aristocracy,” whose constitution was the largest obstacle to “ideas of progress.” In sum, Mercado’s vision of democratic republicanism had triumphed over “barbarism.” Luis Bossero, in the first issue of El Estandarte Nacional in 1856, tied “the march of civilization, the progress of noble ideas, and the emancipation of the human species” together. Here civilization is clearly political, advancing with the triumph of “liberty against despotism.” One speaker at a celebration of Mexican independence declared simply that “liberty is that light” that brings “civilization [and] progress.” Now civilization was no longer wealth (indeed, the aristocracy was its antithesis) or the city or European culture; instead, it was democracy, republicanism, and liberty.

Liberty’s centrality to political modernity made constitutions supremely important as engines of and testaments to civilization. Colombian President José María Obando celebrated the 1853 constitution as “the most democratic code that has governed any pueblo.” Although he later condemned Obando’s treason, Francisco Bilbao agreed that the 1853 constitution “has consecrated all the great conquests of the modern spirit.” When the nation, again under Conservative rule after 1854, debated whether to replace
the 1853 Liberal constitution, which had implemented universal adult male citizenship and suffrage, Barbacoas’s Municipal Council wrote to support the current constitution, “the great thesis of democracy.” The council members argued: “There is not one disposition in our constitution that is not the genuine expression of the philosophy and the civilization of the century.” They warned against any changes, since they were opposed to “all that is not government of the pueblo for the pueblo.” Here we have a provincial legislature—in European eyes, a backwater in the jungles of the Pacific Coast—arguing that a democratic constitution, of the pueblo, was the best expression of the nineteenth century’s civilization. This was not a discourse of lettered elites in the salons of Bogota or Mexico City, but a quotidian language with profound depth and reach, both spatially and socially.

In Mexico the 1857 constitution held a similarly vaunted position, seen as the culmination of La Reforma. In the 1857 Constitutional Congress’s justification of the new charter to the nation, the members stressed how everything in the constitution emanated from “the dogma of the pueblo’s sovereignty,” noting that all “modern societies” used the representative system. This constitution, “the most democratic the Republic has had,” would propel the nation “along the path of progress and reform, civilization and liberty.” The Congress also stressed how quickly modernity moved in the nineteenth century: “Humanity advances day by day, necessitating incessant innovation in its political and social mode of being.” Only through “political and social revolution” could Mexico maintain its position in a nineteenth century whose “spirit’s movement does not rest.” Liberals saw La Reforma as having made Mexico modern, finally fulfilling the promise of independence.

If constitutions represented a hoped-for (if rarely achieved) republican stability, revolution figured as a necessary step on the path to modernity. While disorder, anarchy, and civil wars had so distressed the public sphere under Europhile modernity, now some people celebrated civil wars as a necessary step to secure progress. Flores argued that such wars were the response of people trying to secure a liberal government and “democratic principles.” Worse than having a civil war was to be like Europe, stuck in the past with monarchs blocking the road to modernity. Much more radically, Mercado celebrated Liberals’ taking power (electorally) in 1849 as a “social revolution.” In 1850 and 1851, while Mercado served as Cali’s governor, a popular uprising against Conservative landowners and slaveholders erupted in the Cauca Valley. Poor men and women attacked prominent Conservatives, destroyed fences enclosing commons, and invaded and torched some
haciendas. Although all Conservatives and many Liberals condemned the attacks, Mercado sought to explain them as resulting from the continuation of slavery and the domination of landholding by a small group of “oligarchs” and “pseudo nobles” who exploited the poor. The poor simply could not endure the situation any longer, now that “the star of equality shone in their eyes.” The disorder was regrettable, but it was an understandable part of the “democratic revolution.”

Indeed, civil wars were an unfortunate necessity to establish the republican future and overcome the Old World inheritance of colonialism and religious fanaticism. Montevideo’s La Nación argued that Latin America’s numerous revolutions had engendered “an accretion of liberties.” In a speech to celebrate independence on 16 September 1861 in Chihuahua, Manuel Ojinaga (a Liberal who would die fighting the French) stressed the chaos and even violence of the independence era, but he noted the struggle was necessary to obtain “liberty” and, thus, “civilization.” Postindependence civil wars were due to those who had not given up on the past, those who “have conspired by every excessive means to implant in our young nation the anguished and invalid institutions of Old Europe.” That same year, President Juárez remarked that although the War of the Reform had caused much destruction, it was a “progressive revolution” that had inspired the pueblo to demand “democratic institutions” and to institute “radical reforms.” Unlike under North Atlantic or Western visions of modernity, order was desirable, of course, but not fetishized. When European powers invaded Mexico, Ortiz declared, “I prefer the dangerous storms of liberty to the ignominious peace of slavery.” In an 1862 speech in El Paso del Norte, the doctor Mariano Samaniego surveyed the world and saw an immense international conflict (in Italy, the United States, and Mexico), a series of revolutions that pitted the forces of “progress” and “civilization” against those of “retrogression.” He noted that people feared the word “revolution,” but he argued that the recently ended civil war had been an “indispensable revolution” since it had resulted in “the triumph of liberty and of civilization.” Escobar y Armendáriz compared revolutions to the great volcanoes of Vesuvius, Etna, Popocatepetl, and Chimborazo, explosive forces that would not stop erupting until the world was transformed. El Estandarte Nacional imagined revolution as an omnipotent force that swept across societies, the “work of modern times.” In 1868 La Opinión Nacional certainly recognized the value of peace after the defeat of Maximilian and years of devastating war, but it also emphasized that more important were successful resolutions of political questions in favor of a democratic republicanism, encapsulated
in “modern constitutions” based on popular sovereignty. Progress could be made during times of disorder, and order alone did not signify modernity or civilization.

The embrace of revolution at the expense of order resonated powerfully with the trope of American republicanism’s threat to Europe described above. As France’s invasion loomed, *La Chinaca* defended the Americas and democracy against European accusations of anarchy. The paper began by noting how “calls for liberty” and “democracy” had been crushed so thoroughly in Europe by monarchs that many European peoples “almost do not feel their chains.” Thus, the “banner of liberty” had passed to America, whose revolutions had indeed created disorder but also happiness for the vast majority, who were now freed from their former masters. The paper warned: “This example was dangerous.” Europe needed to employ its “iron rod” to crush “American anarchy” or risk having the people of the Old World be inspired by the example of the New: “It was necessary that there be order and that the citizens become slaves.” Under Europhile modernity, anarchy had been proof of America’s barbarism, and order had been necessary to imitate Europe. Under Western modernity, order would be the prime precondition of civilization, without which societies were doomed to poverty and barbarism (and thus order would become the justification for persecuting and excluding subalterns). Yet under American republicanism, order—though fervently desired—was secondary to democratic liberty, which would provide subalterns with valuable discursive space to engage the nation.

Although Mexican writers looked forward to a new dawn of peace and prosperity after the War of the Reform (1857–61), they did not regret the violence and saw the war as necessary to impel modernity forward. In 1861, in a speech in Hidalgo de Parral celebrating the Liberals’ triumph, José María Camarena declared that the past revolution had been a “step on the road to civilization”; while destructive, it had also paved “the way of human progress.” Revolution was the path to “the future” as long as it advanced societies toward republicanism and “liberty, equality [and] fraternity.” He claimed that “in order to establish ourselves we have needed a true renewal, and renewal is almost always destruction.” Indeed, since revolution was necessary to achieve modernity, that excused the inevitable disorder and devastation that had ensued. Camarena’s vision was not only abstract, but it directly spoke to subalterns as well. Camarena saw revolution as a contest between those promoting human liberation and equality and those defending the ancien régime of aristocrats and the idle rich, a discourse that subalterns could
turn to their own ends. He mixed his very nineteenth-century celebration of progress and civilization with a much older justification that would also have resonated with many of the lower class. Almost as if a forerunner of liberation theology, Camarena declared Jesus Christ an “artisan” who was the “father of democracy” and who had “proclaimed equality of men and had to fight against the power of kings.” Meanwhile, he referred to Conservatives as “vampires” who wanted to repeat the atrocities of the conquistador Cortés. Camarena was just one politician speaking in one small town in northern Mexico, but the tropes of his discourse on revolution and modernity—the necessity of revolution to secure progress, the valuation of republicanism and democracy over order as markers of modernity, and the rhetorical celebration of the popular over the wealthy—resonated across the Americas around midcentury. We will now explore some of the nuances of this vision.

The Rights of Man in Society: Universalism and American Republican Modernity

The vision of modernity held by Camarena and his contemporaries assumed a universalism of humanity. We have already seen how Mexicans and Colombians embraced a teleology of history leading to “universal fraternity,” “universal reform,” a “universal republic” and “universal democracy.” As we saw above, this universalism assumed the diffusion of republicanism, liberty, and rights throughout society. Universalism also affected the proper relations between peoples—the fraternity of nations—to which we will turn next. Most important, universalism conditioned relations within society. In this section, we will examine how American republican modernity imagined the impediments to and buttresses for universalism. Imperialism was the greatest obstacle to universalism between societies. Within societies, American republican modernity decried colonialism’s legacies that hobbled modernity, celebrated new nations’ exertions to overcome these obstacles, and promoted universalism’s triumph over race.

Universalism and Imperialism

After the French invaded, Mexicans’ ideas of how civilized societies should comport themselves in international relations crystallized. La Chinaco envisioned two competing forces in international relations: on one side, “the barbarous principle of conquest and force,” and on the other, “the rights of peoples.” The French had claimed they were invading Mexico in order to civilize the locals, a justification Mexicans particularly resented. Instead,
Mexicans claimed the French had only brought “murder and arson, executed as instruments of civilization.” Mexicans accused the French of having invaded a sovereign nation for no reason and, by murdering and pillaging, having behaved in a barbaric manner: “Which of the two nations is civilized, Mexico or France? Which of the two will have to cover its face in shame when confronted by humanity, justice and true civilization?”

The Municipal Council of Paso del Norte (now called Ciudad Juárez) condemned the French for not respecting the “principles of modern civilization” and instead following the rules of conquest of the “Middle Ages.” A broadside that circulated in Mexico City after the French defeat argued that Europeans, and especially the French, had abandoned “modern diplomacy” in their wars of conquest around the globe. The broadside criticized not only the invasion of Mexico but also Europeans’ “war in China.” It denounced French atrocities in Mexico: “They marched into Puebla and acted as if they were dealing with a horde of savages, as if they were in Algiers, killing in the name of civilization.”

While Europe was embarking on its second great wave of imperial conquest, creating a wave of colonialism that would define modernity until this day, Mexicans proposed a countermodernity that rejected the equation of civilization with power and violence. Escobar y Armendáriz blamed the current state of Asia and Africa on ancient European colonial excursions—“the barbarians of the North,” from Alexander the Great to the Crusaders—and lamented that when Napoleon III invaded Mexico, “he tried to civilize [it] with 50,000 bayonets.” Europe was not only lacking civilization in this view, but actually responsible for exporting barbarism by trying to impose monarchy, increase European states’ power, and recapture their former colonial tributes. Europhile modernity had been turned on its head. This critique of modernity prefigured that made by postcolonial scholars, who point out that European modernity’s costs and violence were borne by colonial peoples. As Stuart Hall and Aníbal Quijano argue, modernity is a product of colonialism. Long before twentieth-century decolonization or postcolonial studies, however, Mexico had not accepted this modernity; instead, it had rejected the neocolonial French project and mocked European pretensions to civilization. Francisco Bilbao also denounced the French (and, indirectly, Hegel) for claiming that civilization was a “Spirit” that created the “modern world,” a force that triumphs—thus justifying the imperialist adventures of the French in Algeria, China, and Mexico. For Bilbao and other followers of American republican modernity, Hegel’s “Spirit” was not a brutal, overreaching power that forcibly subdued other peoples, but the
transformative force of liberty and republicanism that would create a universal fraternity of man.

Colonialism
If imperialism threatened this fraternity in the present, colonialism—and its lingering effects from the past—still exerted enough force to prevent modernity’s reign. According to this view, modernity began with independence, when the Americas broke free from a barbarous Spain and “exchanged liberty for slavery, justice for arbitrary despotism, enlightenment for ignorance and fanaticism, civilization for heinous customs of barbarism, and finally, our new institutions for those stale ones of subjecthood.”107 The colonial era represented backwardness: domination by an ultramontane clergy, indigenous communal landholding, the caste system, and economic stagnation.108 Spain had enriched itself but left nothing of value behind in the New World; instead, it had only brutalized its colonies’ inhabitants both physically and intellectually.109 The broader public sphere’s vision of Spain under American republicanism contrasts sharply with elite letrados’ growing embrace of the Iberian heritage as defining their societies (as discussed by Rebecca Earle), an understanding that would dominate later in the century.110

Independence, however, was only the first step. The new nations’ problems could be blamed squarely on Spanish colonialism and lingering European influence. A Montevideano newspaper complained that after independence the colonial inheritance remained, and only revolutionary reform could truly defeat colonialism, “casting off of us the habits that 300 years of servitude have instilled.”111 Mercado argued that independence had not really changed the colonial system, since “the war against Spain was not a revolution”; it had not ended slavery or the power of the Roman Catholic Church or the aristocracy, and most people were still excluded from a role in governance.112 It would take the “social revolution” of liberal reforms to truly remake society, a revolution carried out by the poor and dispossessed who “contributed to the triumph of Democracy.”113 In 1852 Colombian President López declared in a speech that “a social revolution” had occurred since “the reign of democracy and liberty had arrived” to destroy the “feudalism of the Middle Ages,” which still oppressed society—specifically referring to slavery.114 In Mexico the failures of the era before La Reforma were presented in simplified form as the aristocracy’s success in maintaining its colonial prerogatives in spite of reformers’ efforts. Santa Anna’s complex political career—during which he won support from and supported federalists, centralists, proto-Liberals, and proto-Conservatives—could now be summed
up as his attempt to organize an “aristocratic government.”115 Opposing reform, of course, were Conservatives, who Liberals believed wanted to return Mexico to the “colonial regime.”116 Only after the consolidation of La Reforma did Mexicans express equal confidence, but by the 1860s, they were echoing López’s optimism. This confidence belies Walter Mignolo’s assertions that Latin America was trapped by colonialism’s remnants and an unsuitable Atlantic republican tradition and that “decolonization” was not an option in the nineteenth century.117 Yet Colombians and Mexicans did not think themselves doomed by European colonialism. Instead, they saw their societies leading the way to the creation of a new American democratic republicanism that had destroyed colonialism. The old metropole—not the young New World—was trapped by the past.

Nation
The division between the broader public sphere of the street (as seen in newspapers and oratory) and the more intellectual public sphere of the salon, discussed in the introduction, is most evident in attitudes toward Europe, but it is perhaps just as important for evaluating Latin American nations. For American republicans in the public sphere, as opposed to letrados, the nation did not seem to be a problem; indeed, the vibrancy of new American nations in contrast to decadent European states seemed obvious.118 Independent nations were a mark of modernity in the nineteenth century, while older pan-national empires and monarchies seemed retrograde and doomed to disappear as peoples liberated themselves.119 Since this had already happened in America (except for poor Cuba and other Caribbean islands), while peoples such as the Irish, Poles, Greeks, and Italians still struggled to secure their national rights, America had already surpassed Europe in creating modern nations.120 Indeed, although American republicanism stressed universal fraternity between republican nations, the nation still became the vessel of modernity.

While under Europhile modernity the nation was weak and membership circumscribed to the few letrados, adherents to American republicanism generally expressed great confidence in the nation and the pueblo’s knowledge of and interest in this new identity. In provincial Chihuahua, the captain of a local volunteer militia in 1861 thought that “the nation,” when threatened by reactionaries, “has in itself an irresistible force.”121 The editor and pharmacist José María Jaurrieta boasted that “the entire nation” would rise up against the French.122 Ortiz assured national guard soldiers of victory over the Europeans, since the Mexicans were “great and powerful with our love
of country.” The nationalism of American republican modernity was not an aggressive one; rather, it was defined around a community of shared rights and responsibility, resembling the “revolutionary-democratic” nation described by Eric Hobsbawm and William Sewell. Even during the midst of European invasion, Manuel Muñoz, speaking in Villa de Allende, Mexico, argued that Mexicans did not hate the French people, since hatred between pueblos was a tool used by despotic governments to serve their designs. The classic European view of nationhood focused on cultural differences, but nationhood functioned very differently in mid-nineteenth-century Latin America. A universal fraternity should unite separate nations, just as a universal citizenship should unite people within the nation.

Nineteenth-century Latin Americans realized the nation was a political construct, whereas many Europeans saw it as organic or spiritual. Indeed, Mariano Murillo, a Chihuahuense soldier and politician speaking to rouse his listeners to oppose the French, defined the nation as “ourselves collectively considered,” an imagined community. Instead of seeing this as a weakness, he saw it as a strength, since the nation was united voluntarily, instead of being the construct of parties or rulers. Another orator rallying the pueblo against the French declared that while citizenship in the past might have held little value, “today all Mexicans know that the title of Citizen is not a word with no meaning” but guarantees “the rights of man in society.” The speaker expressed confidence that the pueblo would fight the French to defend the rights they had newly won in La Reforma, as they understandably had not done against the U.S. invaders, since at that time their citizenship was meaningless. In this conception, the nation had power due to the effectiveness, validity, and legitimacy of the pueblo’s citizenship. Faith in American republican modernity and faith in the nation went hand in hand. After the war, the Liberal lawyer and politician Higinio Muñoz argued that the crucible of combat had helped ignite the “fire of love for the country,” uniting such diverse groups as artisans, laborers, the young, and the lettered. Meanwhile, “the old nations of the opposite hemisphere” had no community, only subjects bowing to princes. While in the eighteenth century and twentieth century, both Creole patriots and nativists hoped to construct a postcolonial nation based on deep indigenous pasts, in the mid-nineteenth century the nation emerged out of a faith in the future.

Universalism and Race

However, American republican modernity had to confront the problem of race, which would seem to defy universalism. Those who embraced this vi-
sion of modernity generally were reluctant to recognize racial distinctions, at least rhetorically (although cultural distinctions were another matter). Long before the much-celebrated racial democracy of the Cuban War for Independence, the discourse of American republican modernity also stressed the fraternity of man, if in equally incomplete fashion. José Manuel Estrada, an Argentine defender of Catholicism, stressed the unity of the mixed “American race,” calling it “a new race in history.” Murillo welcomed “everyone, everyone universally, without notice of sex, nor differences of color, nor unjust preferences of fortune,” to an 1862 Mexican independence celebration, thus emphasizing the universal fraternity that was part of American republicanism. A Colombian writer embraced universalism even more fervently, declaring that race did not exist but was based on “ridiculous accidents” and that societies should extinguish racial distinctions.

Former President López remarked that “there is not a more savage banner that that of skin color.” He argued that those predicting a race war were usually just trying to justify slavery. However, he had great faith that “a good political system” would sooner or later lead to racial mixing to such an extent that racial division would be impossible. Presumably, López saw this as a process of whitening, but his views also revealed a sense of universalism, in which the old hierarchies of race would disappear. Latin Americans’ pride in their societies having advanced, at least institutionally, beyond racism was a key element of their modernity, and this rhetoric reflected republican law, which did not recognize racial distinctions.

Of course, central to this idea of universalism was slavery’s abolition. In Colombia and Uruguay, abolition became one of American republican modernity’s central tropes. As we saw in chapter 1, after Uruguay’s circumscribed abolition of 1842, a newspaper declared that President Fructuoso Rivera “had washed away the black mark that had tarnished the luster of the Republic.” Emancipation and the abolition of racial limits to citizenship, while a military necessity, were also related to the American republican vision of modernity. Uruguayans thought that true republicanism did not tolerate slavery or racial discrimination, but that “monarchy requires class distinctions and social hierarchies.” In Colombia, Conservatives moaned that “the red democracy” that had taken hold in the country by 1850 had incited slaves to misbehave. In a speech to celebrate the abolition of slavery on 1 January 1852, Governor Vicente Fontal spoke directly to the newly emancipated, reminding them that their “democratic government,” in the hands of the Liberal Party, had freed them and made them “citizens.” There could not be a “true Republic, where the enslavement of a great number of
our brothers endures.” Slavery had become anathema to American republican modernity.

Beyond emancipation, Liberals regularly accused Conservatives of racism. A speaker at a meeting of Cali’s Democratic Society blasted Conservatives for denying racial equality. La Chinaca rejected the racism of Conservatives who claimed European superiority, crowing that after the battle of Puebla, the French knew the prowess of “Indian and Mestizo Mexicans” in combat. Mexico’s victory had proved wrong those “wise ambassadors who had assured [the French and Maximilian] that our brutish Indians would humbly and reverentially inquire of the health of the Spanish sovereign.” La Chinaca explicitly blamed the letrado class for spreading false notions of Mexican barbarism in Europe. The French had expected to find “a mob of mulattoes . . . a tribe of savages, a horde of mestizos and brutish lepers,” but had instead encountered a force of “modest but intrepid citizens.” Here two views of Mexico emerge. For the letrado and scientific elite (científicos-positivist technocrats), Mexico was barbarous and racially suspect, according to the European standards of modernity they accepted as valid. For the public sphere, however, Mexico was not made up of uncultured Indians, mestizos, and mulattoes, but simply of citizens. One vision is geographic, cultural, racial, and “scientific”; the other is political.

With abolition, the question of citizenship rights and racial equality came to the fore, and Spanish Americans took great pride in noting the absence of legal segregation and caste laws. When La Unión declared Colombia “the vanguard in America,” it explicitly justified this boast by noting: “Men of color are as esteemed as whites, each enjoying the same rights and guarantees.” Colombians knew this was not the case in much of the Atlantic world and rightly trumpeted their achievement (we can note, of course, that racism existed in Colombia, but nonetheless such a statement would have been inconceivable in the United States). In Mexico, El Globo asserted: “Our Republic is the model for democracies . . . giving a lesson of progress to her powerful neighbor to the North, since she does not organize her social rankings according to tints of color nor racial distinctions.” Although the United States was usually recognized as a model republic, due to its political stability and economic progress, Mexicans felt that North American racism was a fatal flaw in U.S. claims to modernity. Modernizing visions’ power is clear here, both as a cause and effect, because considering antiracism as a central element of modernity was impossible for most in the United States. La Voz Nacional celebrated Union victories in the Civil War and the apparent desire to end slavery, which the paper claimed had always been a stain on
U.S. institutions; the United States was not in the lead, but just now catching up to the modernity already conquered by its American neighbors.\(^4\)

It is of course both easy and necessary to point out the contradictions and limits to republican universalism. Universal male citizenship automatically excluded women from the citizen body. There were other limits to universalism beyond gender: Indians who would not abandon their identity as Indians were often excluded from citizenship and brutally persecuted. Citizenship could be a double-edged sword, a powerful tool used by subalterns to demand their rights, but also a requirement that previous identities, such as Indianness, be abandoned. I do not mean to suggest that these exclusions are not critical, and I will close this chapter by showing how these contradictions would fatally undermine American republican modernity. However, the trend in historiography has been to dismiss republicanism, democracy, universalism, and equality as meaningless for the vast majority. Therefore, we will first examine American republican modernity’s conception of the pueblo and then investigate whether the pueblo appropriated elements of American republican modernity for its own ends.

**Conceptualizing the Pueblo**

American republican modernity’s flowery and romantic rhetoric, with its embrace of liberty, equality, and fraternity, represented a sharp break with past conceptions of the pueblo. First, we will examine what this discourse meant by the “pueblo.” Then we will turn to the images of class, wealth, and power that American republican modernity manipulated. Next, we will consider notions of sovereignty, especially popular sovereignty.\(^5\) I will argue that the conceptualization of the pueblo under American republican modernity would provide subalterns with much more room to maneuver and many more discursive tools to appropriate than its conception under Europhile modernity (or, later, Western modernity).

Many writers used the word “pueblo” with a double meaning, to embrace all the people in society but also to refer to only those citizens suited to play a role in public life. However, by using “pueblo” without stating such conditions (as they had been openly stated earlier), the lower classes could claim that they were indeed the pueblo, whatever the writers’ intentions. By choosing not to explicitly limit the pueblo (for whatever reasons), politicians and intellectuals gave the lower classes an opening.

Under American republican modernity, however, a new vision of the pueblo emerged that explicitly included the poor at the expense of the indolent, corrupt elite, imagined as retrograde Conservatives.\(^6\) In Cali in 1849, El
Sentimiento Democrático defended the pueblo against those of the “first circle” who had declared that “the pueblo is insolent, is barbarous, is immoral.” On the contrary, the paper argued, this self-proclaimed elite should bear these epithets. The paper noted that all men were flawed, but that the remedy lay not in the pueblo’s exclusion, but only in “fraternity and democracy with all their consequences.”\textsuperscript{147} El Pensamiento Popular declared: “The time of the pueblo’s blind obedience to certain families and persons, due to imaginary titles, is over.”\textsuperscript{148} Here the pueblo clearly is the masses as opposed to powerful elite families, echoing Hobsbawm’s revolutionary, democratic conception of the nation as one that emphasized “common good against privilege.”\textsuperscript{149}

In Mexico, El Monitor Republicano remembered Mexican independence as “the triumph of the pueblo over the privileged classes, the victory, bloody but inevitable, of democracy over aristocracy.”\textsuperscript{150} La Libertad made a clear distinction between “those that pretend to be masters and lords, in order to suck the pueblo’s blood, and that same pueblo that dies from hunger, sunk in misery and forgotten.”\textsuperscript{151} La Chinaca claimed that true Mexicans were not men such as Juan Almonte, who—traveling in great luxury—had visited the courts of Europe seeking a monarch for Mexico, but “the poorest artisan, the lowest shoemaker.”\textsuperscript{152} Under Europhile modernity, only those who had the means to travel to Europe and absorb its civilization mattered. In contrast, under American republican modernity, those same lettrados now seemed traitorous at worst and superfluous at best. The pueblo—here marked as poor, but including the middle class and elite Liberals—now had more standing.

This shifting definition of the pueblo also marked a change in the meaning of public opinion and in whose opinion mattered, evolving from only an emphasis on educated property holders or lettrados (the salon) to become more inclusive (the street).\textsuperscript{153} Previously, public opinion belonged to the educated elite; now, President López directly cited “the movement of opinion” in western Colombia concerning slavery’s abolition, driven by the desires of “the poor classes and slaves” who “perceived that a new era of liberty is coming.”\textsuperscript{154} Another politician wrote to López in 1852, urging him to end the apprenticeship system and arguing that such policy would “strengthen public opinion.”\textsuperscript{155} As the French invaded Mexico, El Siglo Diez y Nueve was sure that “public opinion” would fortify Mexico’s soldiers and make them “invincible.”\textsuperscript{156} The public sphere suddenly was much enlarged, now including slaves, the poor, and soldiers, heralding changes to notions of sovereignty as well.\textsuperscript{157}
The public sphere no longer just included the lower class in the pueblo, but it also often condemned the upper class as barbarous. While questioning North Atlantic modernity’s racism was quite common, most elite and middle-class proponents of republican modernity did not question the class divisions that underlay much thinking about modernity. However, many of them did. Public speakers often attacked their Conservative or monarchical foes as being representatives of the upper class. During Uruguay’s civil war, El Nacional urged the French expatriates to enlist: “If you and your fathers had listened to the prudent courtesans, to the rich, to the nobles,” you would not have toppled “the sanctum sanctorum of despotism.” In Colombia, Roldanillo’s Democratic Society directly associated powerful Conservative families with aristocracy and backwardness by envisioning Colombian politics as a contest between “the feudal class” and “the disinherit.”159 Liberals in Popayán distributed a broadside proclaiming they believed “that only the pueblo is sovereign,” while their Conservative enemies “disrespected the popular masses,” holding that only the educated elites from the best families could rule.160 In Cali, Liberals mocked Conservatives’ pretensions that a small, educated class should rule over the debased, racially heterogeneous mass of society. El Caucañito tittered at the Conservative Arcesio Escovar’s fear that the “monster of the democratic republic” had allowed the “predominance of the barbarous element.”161 Once dogma, the idea that the pueblo was too barbarous to participate in politics had become an object of ridicule.

In Mexico as well, the public sphere resounded with denunciations of the wealthy and powerful as traitors, and with celebrations of the honorable poor’s steadfastness. The Municipal Council of Bravos District in Villa del Paso promised to fight the French to protect their “popular institutions” against the “ominous yoke of the privileged classes’ tyranny.”162 A manifesto signed by various soldiers blasted the rich and those “who wanted to be aristocrats” for supporting the French.163 Guanajuato’s El Calavera mocked its opponents as supporting an “aristocratic and monkish republic.”164 For Liberals, the enemy was the clergy and “the Mexican rich, who want to be nobles.”165 Liberals certainly only meant the nefarious elements in the upper class—Conservatives and monarchists—but the pueblo would have heard something else. From being civilization’s outcasts, the internal barbarians threatening to destroy their own societies, the poor and middling classes suddenly were the nation, and the rich were now the barbarous vampires, threatening modernity with their sloth, privileges, and freeloading. La Bandera Nacional declared: “Our backward aristocracy is not progressing down
the path to civilization and does not understand the demands of the century.”

Under Europhile modernity, the pueblo were ignorant barbarians, threatening to overturn the fragile civilization that educated letrados had constructed by securing ties to Europe; under Western modernity, the pueblo, due to its demands and political participation, would become a threat to the economic modernity that capitalists and state builders hoped to create. Under American republican modernity, however, the pueblo was the nation, and its members deserved their place as citizens. In 1861 a Mexican Liberal speaker appealed to his “cocitizens” to resist Conservatives, who were the army, the clergy, and “wealthy landholders” enjoying “ill-gotten riches”; all of these groups were “cannibals who fed themselves on human blood.”

Similarly, orators such as those rallying resistance to the French Intervention regularly peppered their discourse with allusions to slavery and enslavement. Although slavery was a fairly standard political metaphor for any kind of oppression, for many subalterns it was not an abstract concept or a stand-in for loss of rights but a real condition, remembered and experienced by many. Subalterns regularly heard discourse condemning Conservatives or foreign invaders as those who pretended to be “masters,” before whom the pueblo would not even be allowed “to lift our humble faces.” However, the pueblo would reject such domination, instead insisting on the title of “citizens worthy of belonging to a free people.”

This elite speaker, Chihuahua’s governor, referred to the looming European invasion, but—as we will see below—subalterns seized this exact language to confront the economic oppression of enslavement or wealthy landholders who monopolized land. Whatever elite Liberals’ intent, it is a short move from elite orators’ celebrating the pueblo’s defense of its rights to real subalterns acting to demand and protect those rights.

Conservatives warned of the immense dangers that Liberals created by “fomenting hatred of the poor against the rich.” Many Liberals had similar fears, worrying that their more radical fellows would foment “a class war” with such provocative language. Conservatives certainly realized the power of language; El Imperio (with its title helpfully clarifying its views) complained that the rebels resisting Maximilian kept using potent words such as “colony,” “Duke,” “subject,” and “slave.” Living under American republican modernity, Conservatives were not nearly as sanguine as contemporary historians that this discourse was just for show.

More than just vilifying the Conservative rich, American republican modernity celebrated an equality much more potent than classical liberalism’s
legalistic conception. La Chinaca noted that in Europe the poor had to “hum- 
ibly remove their hats before their master,” but that in Mexico “all men are 
equal.” Interactions with the pueblo, both efforts to recruit subalterns and 
subalterns’ own projects, demanded equality’s redefinition from simply a le-
gal matter to encompass social and economic terrain. As with slaves and for-
mer slaves in Montevideo, subalterns themselves had long imbued equality 
with more expansive visions of social and economic rights. When the need 
arose for Liberals to bargain with subalterns for support, the public sphere 
began to embrace similar notions. La Guerra denounced those who supported 
the European invasion, claiming such Conservatives saw the intervention as 
“killing [the] equality of classes, that foolish equality that causes the pueblo 
to swell with pride.” Instead, Conservatives planned to restrict equality and, 
if they took power, “would elevate themselves above the lower class.”
Here equality has an explicitly class dimension. A broadside printed in Bogota 
made clear that the attacks on Conservatives in the Cauca region were the 
result of past Conservative domination, especially the institution of slavery, 
“the division of property,” and an “oppression so long, opprobrious, and 
brutalizing.” The broadside argued that “the theory of equality has changed 
the thinking of those populations, the memory of so many humiliations and 
injustices has upended everything.” For subalterns, equality was perhaps 
the most important idea they could appropriate to improve their lives.

Although equality was critical rhetorically, even more important insti-
tutionally for subalterns were the new conceptions of sovereignty gaining 
dominance in the public sphere. Liberals liked to refer to their mission as 
“the popular cause.” It may seem commonplace that politicians would 
refer to their ideas as popular, but for the nineteenth century it was still a rev-
elation that enjoying popular support validated a government or a political 
movement. This was a startling change in notions of sovereignty. La Opinión 
Nacional argued that “modern principles” demanded that “the popular will, 
legitimately represented, is the supreme law.” Liberals regularly asserted 
that it was the pueblo that now held “sovereignty.” El Monitor Republicano 
posited that “public power” came from the “true, spontaneous, general and 
simultaneous emission of the pueblo’s suffrage.” Power should not be in 
the hands of one man (a monarch) or “a reduced circle, under the pompous 
title of notables.” As American republican modernity matured, a reconfig-
uration of sovereignty and the theory of republican government occurred.

Certainly historians are correct to note Liberals’ contradictions and elit-
ist employment of soberanía popular (popular sovereignty) that worked as 
much to exclude the pueblo (on the grounds of race, gender, education, or
rationality) as to promote inclusion. However, contemporary Conservatives, such as Lucas Alamán and the editors of El Universal in Mexico, had no doubts about the potential (and, for them, dangerous) power that notions of popular sovereignty gave to the lower classes. Conservatives condemned Liberals for claiming to act in the name of the pueblo, as this only fostered the “antipathy of classes.” If Liberals insisted on using such language, the pueblo would eventually act on its own, ending with the destruction of “all virtue, property and knowledge” and with “the revolutionary knife” against the throats of all the wealthy. Colombian Conservatives rejected as “pure democracy” the Democratic Societies’ assertions that elected officials must follow the pueblo’s will. Following the will of the uneducated masses would only lead to the rule of “the most poor, ignorant, miserable and abject class of society.” A Guanajuatense paper with the evocative title El Obrero del Porvenir condemned efforts in the 1870s to reform the state constitution, claiming it would allow an oligarchy to form and the governor to serve perpetually, replacing what the paper praised as a “democracy” with the “abortion of a parliamentary government.” Whatever elite Liberals’ intent in the 1850s and 1860s, by constantly declaring the pueblo sovereign, they gave subalterns a potent tool to wield in their interactions with the state and nation. However, this discourse of popular sovereignty would have meant little without the daily enactment of democratic and republican political practices.

The Quotidian Practice of Democracy and Republicanism

Did all of this talk matter? In Colombia and Mexico, a discourse of political modernity and the practice of politics tightly intertwined. The reason writers in these Latin American societies embraced a modernity that focused on democratic republican politics and rights is that—they had achieved much by the 1860s. The “popular sovereignty” that politicians rhetorically celebrated found lived expression in a rich repertoire of politics practiced by elites, the middle class, and subalterns (which a new generation of scholars have uncovered, even if they are not yet fully recognized by Latin American history’s master narratives). Mexicans and Colombians voted in elections, vigorously campaigned for favored candidates, pressured representatives from legislatures’ galleries, marched in demonstrations, joined political clubs, sent petitions, served as citizen soldiers in national guards, organized boycotts, attended political ceremonies and speeches, and interpreted abstract political theories to make them meaningful for their daily lives. The practices of democracy and republicanism
were not only the concern of a few letrados in capital cities; they formed part of citizens’ quotidian lived experience.

I certainly would not claim that voting is the most important element of democratic republicanism, but the right to vote is at least symbolically important and easily measured. In 1853 Roldanillo’s Democratic Society celebrated “direct and secret suffrage, this holy conquest of enlightened reason.” El Pensamiento Popular exulted that the pueblo marched to the polls in the hundreds as Colombia wrestled with abolition, voting to ensure “the liberty of the slaves and the march of Democracy.” Institutionally, Colombia (and Argentina) enacted unrestricted adult male suffrage in 1853, eliminating all property and literacy requirements. Mexico came close to doing so in 1857, only demanding that the prospective voter have “an honest way of making a living.” The Mexican constitution of 1857 and the Colombian constitutions of 1853 and 1863 also made liberal promises of a broad range of civil rights to be enjoyed by citizens: association, press, speech, religion (less so in Mexico than Colombia), due process, bearing of arms, and to petition. Both countries would try to abolish the death penalty. Mexicans and Colombians could claim they had overtaken Europe on the path to modernity because they had created political institutions that were much more republican and democratic than those in the Old World. In comparison, while in 1855 only three out of thirty-one U.S. states still maintained property restrictions for citizenship, twenty-five had enacted racial restrictions. In 1810, 47 percent of U.S. states had racial restrictions, but in 1855 the number excluding non-whites had increased to 81 percent. While Latin America was making great strides in expanding the citizen class, the United States retrogressed. So did France, where the 1850 suffrage law reduced the number of eligible voters in some municipalities by over 75 percent. In Europe, universal male suffrage would not generally be achieved until well into the twentieth century.

Conservatives’ horror of universal adult male suffrage reveals the importance of these developments. An 1859 letter to Colombian President Mariano Ospina noted that after the voting in Palmira, “an Indian, a black and a half white were elected.” Pedro José Piedrahíta, writing from Cali, claimed that since “universal, direct and secret suffrage was established,” the result had favored candidates who preached to the “democratic masses,” while the support for “property holders and intelligent citizens” had diminished. He complained that in the most recent elections the electoral tables were surrounded by “blacks,” many of whom voted twice because, to Piedrahíta and his fellows, all blacks looked the same and could
thus vote again and again. He disgustedly asked: “How does this Democratic Republic seem to you?”

Conservatives’ fears reveal two other ways the pueblo practiced politics: campaigning for candidates and even serving in offices. Concerns about fraud did not prevent candidates from campaigning vigorously or necessarily diminish the enthusiasm for elections of many in the pueblo. In Colombia candidates proffered food and drink to entice citizens to attend campaign events, entered taverns to press the flesh, and even dressed in peasant garb to appeal to rural voters, sitting down and “drinking aguardiente [cane liquor] with the Indians.” These politicians actively courted voters with ubiquitous promises to lower taxes and pledges of support for a variety of local concerns. Although the middle class and elites dominated most regional and national offices, politicians with close ties to the pueblo could and did win important elections, as did the Afro-Colombian scholar and soldier David Peña, the subject of chapter 6. Indigenous men regularly held local village offices in Mexico and Colombia. These candidates and their campaigns often found vocal support in the numerous political clubs that sprang up in cities and towns across Latin America.

Perhaps the most important evidence of Latin America’s vibrant democratic culture is the rich associational culture that created a public sphere to debate the meanings of republicanism and liberty and then act to put those meanings into practice. Carlos Forment has emphasized how critical associational culture was in fostering a democratic tradition. Clubs and associations sprang up all across Latin America in astounding numbers; Forment discovered 7,056 voluntary associations in nineteenth-century Argentina, Cuba, Mexico, and Peru alone. In Buenos Aires, after the fall of Juan Manuel de Rosas in 1852, numerous electoral clubs appeared in the city, boasting hundreds of members each and seeking to influence public opinion and bring out the vote on election day. In an effort to revitalize republicanism and citizenship in Peru, 114 men formed the Independent Electoral Society in Lima in 1872. The society was intentionally multiclass, including intellectuals, artisans, bankers, merchants, farmers, and soldiers. Colombia’s Democratic Societies, which in the southwest counted many Afro-Colombians as members, had a similar multiclass and multiracial membership. The clubs acted as mutual aid societies; offered literacy classes; hosted speeches and debates; organized National Guard units; and, most important, served as an amplifier for their members’ concerns, sending petitions demanding redress for issues of citizenship, land, slavery, and education. The clubs created a public sphere open to democracy and republicanism.
Political clubs, and the readings of newspapers aloud and the political oratory heard there, allowed subalterns to engage with American republicanism’s discourse; numerous civic festivals and country lawyers helped as well. On the anniversary of Liberals’ retaking of Chihuahua from Conservatives during the War of the Reform, elite organizers planned a private celebration, but others in the community claimed an “equal right” to the anniversary, and the party was made public. The pueblo attended these civic festivals “without class distinctions”; even women came, wearing ribbons with political inscriptions braided in their hair. In Paso del Norte, the organizers noted with approval the attendance of Indians, who—presided over by their governor—contributed their songs and music. Towns, cities, and villages hosted festivals to swear allegiance to new constitutions or celebrate independence days, creating a public sphere that imagined nation and democracy as intertwined. Speeches were ubiquitous, spreading the discourse of American republican modernity, but “patriotic juntas” made sure to organize parades, music, fireworks, dances, and sporting events; they also distributed charitable donations to widows and orphans. These celebrations united rich and poor, men and women, and constituted an important alternative to religious celebrations, especially masses and saints’ days, that tended to have a conservative cast. Through drinking, dancing, and debating, the nation came into being. Also spreading such discourse were local scribes or country lawyers (often despised by elites) called tinterillos, who helped individuals and villages draw up petitions and legal documents. Newspapers, oratory, public petitions, denunciations (such as pledges to resist the French), and festivals all reached deep into the provincial countryside, opening up the world of the patria chica. Subalterns would absorb American republican modernity’s discourse, reframe it to reflect their needs and values, and turn it to their own ends, all of which, along with the bargaining we will explore below, were critical to making the practice of republicanism meaningful.

Elections, campaigns, festivals, and clubs were all venues of politics that were recognized, at least usually, by the state and elites as central to democratic republicanism. However, Mexicans and Colombians engaged in numerous other political practices to influence their representatives and make their citizenship effective. They marched in demonstrations to protest foreign deals, support a political party, fete their heroes, or contest constitutional changes. They packed legislatures’ galleries, applauding their favorites and booing their opponents (much to the chagrin of those suspicious of democracy, as opposed to just republicanism). They organized boycotts
of liquor if they disapproved of the monopolies they saw as a continuation of colonial rule. They sent thousands of petitions—about land, slavery, taxes, pensions, suffrage rights, and local officials—demanding the state accede to their demands as citizens. And they served as “armed citizens” in national guards, both gaining the standing of the citizen soldier vis-à-vis the state, but also appropriating the power that the threat of armed force contains, as we will explore below.

Yet this active and expansive repertoire of politics would have meant little if Liberals and subalterns also had not engaged in a wide-ranging bargaining over the meanings and outcomes of republicanism, creating the popular liberalism whose study (pioneered by Guy Thomson and Florencia Mallon) has transformed our understanding of the nineteenth century. Popular interpretations of liberalism (and republicanism) varied widely among distinct subaltern groups, but they often focused on obtaining social and political equality regardless of social status (a point that we will explore further in chapter 6) and greater economic equality. Issues of land, so dear to rural subalterns, provide a window into seeing how interactions between elites and popular classes, facilitated by democratic republicanism, transformed classical liberalism. Sometimes this challenge was indirect, as when Mercado declared that “equality” reigned, ending “odious privileges” and “dividing among all men with more equity the common inheritance.” A similar debate erupted between newspapers in Cali. El Hombre called the editors of El Pensamiento Popular “barbarians” for promoting an equality of property and the equal sharing of all of God’s bounty. El Pensamiento Popular primarily referred to rights and political equality in its discourse, rather than directly to landed property, but it is hard to imagine what else the pueblo would have thought of when they heard about an equality of God’s “natural gifts.”

This language resonated with a long popular tradition of speaking about land and water as the common inheritance from God. El Pensamiento Popular encouraged this reasoning, asking why some had “thousands of acres” of land while others had none, and asserting that the masses’ poverty was the result of “tyranny and the usurpation and cruelty exercised by their oppressors.” Concerning land more concretely, Francisco Bilbao argued in 1844 that Latin America’s revolutions were incomplete because only political change had occurred; true liberty could be achieved only by breaking up old feudal property holdings and raising salaries to a level that supported “human dignity.”

This debate did not just flow through newspapers and oratory; it also entered the halls of government. Discussions in provincial legislatures, which
the public attended in the galleries, allowed Liberals and subalterns to share a similar discourse. A manager of a Conservative family’s massive hacienda in the Cauca reported one such meeting in 1864, in which Liberals argued that “already the aristocracy of pride had fallen, and now it is necessary that the aristocracy of wealth falls too; to possess more land than one is able to cultivate immediately is a crime, which holds the pueblo in poverty.” The unnamed speaker continued that this inequality was the result of the “conquistadors,” who took all the good land for themselves while leaving only the most sterile and barren for the “Indians.” In Mexico, La Bandera Nacional pushed the state to act, hoping that after victory over the French, the nation would reward soldiers and punish the “aristocracy.” The paper proposed continuing the work of Sebastián Lerdo—the author of the Liberals’ 1856 law that sought to eliminate corporate and communal property holding—but instead of just appropriating ecclesiastical property, it suggested confiscating the lands of those supporting the foreign invaders. This “agrarian law” would then distribute the land to the soldiers who had sacrificed so much for the national cause.

Property is sacred to classical liberalism, but popular liberals forced at least a consideration of equality and justice when considering land distribution. Land certainly obsessed subalterns most, as we will see below, but Liberals and popular groups negotiated about a range of issues, reflecting values and discourses emerging out of American republican modernity. During Uruguay’s Guerra Grande, the state set prices for subsistence foods, so that the populace “would not be the victim of an insane greed.” Colorado papers often urged the state to reward or protect the government’s popular followers, be it supporting subaltern land claims, suspending rents, denouncing unjust prices at the butcher, or exempting the poor from some taxes. In southwestern Colombia, Governor Miguel Burbano objected to a proposed law allowing corporal punishment of vagrants as neither in the spirit of the nineteenth century nor of a “Republican Government.” In Mexico, Diario de Gobierno declared in 1863 that the French Intervention was a great battle between “our revolution” and a rebellious clergy. The paper warned that if the clergy won, Mexico would endure forced taxation on behalf of the Church, “monopolies in favor of the rich,” conscription, more taxes in general, no personal freedoms, the Inquisition, and foreign monarchy, among other travesties. However, if the “liberal revolution” triumphed, the pueblo would enjoy a full panoply of personal rights (speech, press, religion) and the “liberty to eat,” “liberty to move,” the end of sales and religions taxes, the end of the death penalty (except for traitors), and the end of corporal
punishment. The list, clearly designed to appeal to the poor, reveals that the “liberal revolution” went much beyond the tenets of classical liberalism. However, in its radically antireligious stance—“the end of miracles and appearances of saints”—it shows the disconnect between a popular religiosity and elite intellectual thought, even if both might share an anticlericism at times.24 Certainly much of the list, such as municipal liberty or freedom of commerce, might mean one thing to elite Liberals but have radically different meanings of personal and local freedoms for subalterns. In general, subalterns used the practices of democratic republicanism to promote their own visions of social and economic justice.

Scholars might respond that the democratic and republican practices of Latin America were replete with fraud and corruption. However, what matters most is that, first, Latin Americans thought these political practices, however imperfect, were working and a path to modernity; and that, second, a comparison with Europe and the United States reveals considerable corruption and fraud, yet few claim such malfeasance totally invalidates their political histories.25 Yes, fraud existed. Yes, elites often trampled on democratic republicanism when they could. Yes, many subalterns—especially women, but also those trapped by brutal bosses and patrons—found little space in which they could participate in political life. Yet if we survey the world in the 1850s and 1860s, we can easily argue that Latin America (and the United States) enjoyed a level of quotidian republican and democratic practice far exceeding that of most of the world. Moreover, although we might point to the greater regularity of U.S. elections and respect for the results, we might just as importantly note Latin America’s greater progress in including Afro-Spanish Americans and many indigenous peoples. Mexicans and Colombians did not just assert their superior claim to modernity due to their republicanism, they practiced it daily. Their voting, campaigning, marching, petitioning, orating, and associating all attest to a rich democratic republican culture that flourished in the mid-nineteenth century; and bargaining, which we will now explore further, suggests that these practices had meaning for people’s everyday lives.

A Sovereign Pueblo: Subaltern Appropriation of American Republican Modernity

How did American republican modernity’s discourse filter down below the level of newspapers and politicians’ oratory? Did subalterns use this discourse, and did it matter to them?26 In attempting to answer these questions, I use the term “subaltern” in its most wide-ranging, catholic sense—not,
in this case, as a substitute for “lower class.” Subalternity may be any level of subordination in regard to national elites; thus, subalterns might be the lower class, but they might also be provincial power brokers or middle classes in contrast to the national state. This follows both of Ranajit Guha’s definitions for subaltern: the one denoting a “general attribute of subordination,” and the other employed as shorthand for nonelites, the “people.”

My book Contentious Republicans examined the local social and economic conditions that shaped different lower-class groups’ particular understanding of republican politics. Here I am more interested in investigating American republican modernity’s reach into and across society, both geographically and socioeconomically. I argue that American republican modernity’s political emphasis provided subalterns with a much more efficacious and emancipatory vision of progress that they could exploit, compared to other conceptions of modernity that ruled the public sphere earlier and later.

Subalterns encountered American republicanism’s discourse at festivals and in speeches, political clubs, and the public readings of newspapers. They also participated directly, at least as signatories, in petitions and protests (assuming that they only signed, instead of participating more broadly, presupposes a level of elite power for which there is little evidence) that both crafted and applied this discourse to their own lives. In 1862 Manuel Muñiz, the local authorities, the National Guard, and 198 residents of the small town of San Felipe, near Guanajuato, gathered at a public meeting to decide the town’s response to the French invasion. Their protest reveals the extent to which American republicanism’s tropes had permeated provincial life and this language’s power to bridge class divides, while still serving as a tool for popular groups to claim a place at the table of the nation. Although letrados often fretted about the limited penetration of national life into the countryside, these provincials had no doubt that the “nation” would triumph over a “foreign power” and the “ridiculous idea of establishing a monarchy in Mexico.” As we explored in the prologue, even the people of this small town thought that the world was watching Mexico’s struggle and that civilization’s fate rested with them: they imagined a modernity based on independent national life, popular sovereignty, republicanism, and liberty in contrast to a retrograde aristocracy, monarchy, and colonialism.

The broadside created in the meeting also recasts Mexican history to reflect this worldview, depicting Mexicans as heirs to the pre-conquest Indians who had been conquered and exploited by Spanish colonialism, “the most oppressive slavery.” However, the independence period allowed the “enslaved race” to overthrow their tormenters, as part of “the progressive
emancipation of humanity.” Since that time, the “retrograde men” had been struggling to roll back the changes engendered by independence. Of course, this fight now continued with the French—joined by traitorous Mexicans—replacing the Spanish. The protest was almost surely written by a local intellectual of the middle or even provincial upper class, but it has a surprisingly popular cast. While the town represented the “sovereignty of the pueblo,” its enemies were the “privileged classes” who invoked the monarchy of the “Old World.” The pueblo here is cast as humble natives, struggling against slavery and the abuses of the foreign invaders and Mexico’s own “degraded and vile” wealthy, who plotted to retain their colonial prerogatives. This discourse made clear to which imagined community Mexico truly belonged. Indeed, belying the idea the nation was seen as alien, Latin American subalterns’ appropriation of the nation seems much stronger than that of their European counterparts at this time. This petition presents a number of themes that were present in the discourse of many Mexican and Colombian subalterns during American republican modernity’s ascendance: first, for subalterns, the nation was real, and they claimed citizenship in order to be a part of it; second, subalterns sensed a powerful connection between American republicanism’s condemnation of the traitorous rich and their own struggles with hacendados, local officials, and bosses; and third, subalterns embraced popular sovereignty as a meaningful relationship between citizens and the state.

American republican modernity provided rich veins of material that subalterns could mine. Most potently, subalterns eagerly appropriated the identity of the rights-bearing citizen (often in contrast to the aristocracy and the idle rich). A protest from a small northern Mexico mining town signed by fifty-four “citizens,” many illiterate, promised that the signatories would fight against the French. The undersigned, most probably miners, claimed that they were “true republicans” who hated monarchy, since it was fit only for “vile slaves”: “We do not want to be the lackeys or lapdogs of any monarch.” They attacked their enemies as the “notables” and moneylenders who were in league with the French. These miners thus demonstrated that an identity of true republicans served as an antidote against the deference expected by both foreign monarchs and the local gentry. Subalterns easily related American republicanism’s condemnation of the traitorous rich to their own experience with bosses, landlords, and local potentates. Slavery, merely a metaphor for elites, was a meaningful lived experience for subalterns.

As noted above, political clubs played a key role in subalterns’ investment in American republicanism. In a speech to an artisans’ society in Mexico City
in 1848, a Mr. Portugal contrasted the hard work of artisans, who were the best “citizens” and who “gave value to nations,” with that of those who protected their colonial privileges to ensure “the despotism of the privileged classes.” In 1877, the members of Cali’s Democratic Society, having just defeated Conservatives in the 1876–77 civil war, demanded their back pay, pensions, and, most important, the distribution of land as a reward for their service. The veterans claimed they had fought for “liberty” against the Conservatives, who saw them as the “slaves of these so-called feudal lords.” This war had pitted those who enjoyed “great wealth and immense landholdings” against “the poor masses.” Now the soldiers demanded payment from a Liberal state that claimed to rule in the name of liberty and republican democracy. They demanded land so that they could fully be “citizens of a free people.”

The Democratic Society’s claims sum up the power that republicanism, citizenship, and military service offered subalterns: it gave them an opportunity to be indispensable to the state (Liberals would have lost the war without the Democratic Society’s support) and a discourse of republican and democratic rights with which to make their demands resonate with the state’s and nation’s dominant ethos.

A common argument is that such language is just flowery boilerplate, inserted by tinterillos to impress the powerful. Certainly, subalterns often sought to shape their language to please the state. However, not all did so. There were plenty of standard, colonial-style petitions that just stressed the supplicants’ misery, begging for mercy and protection. Subalterns did make a choice to use this language and, as I have explored elsewhere, tailored their usage to their specific needs and political beliefs and practices.

For our purposes, what is more interesting is how reigning visions of modernity allowed, encouraged, and made more efficacious certain types of subaltern discourse. Of even more interest, if not completely resolvable, is the question of how the interaction of subalterns and elites pushed the public sphere to embrace a much more radical and emancipatory discourse than elites alone might have developed. Indeed, republican discourse was perhaps more crucial to subalterns, who had little access to the legal maneuvering, than to elites, who often simply used the law, instead of moral or political arguments, to justify their claims.

Of course, subalterns did not abandon older justifications and identities when assuming citizenship (as many Liberals had hoped they would) but combined them with American republican modernity’s discourse. Indians from San Andrés, Guanajuato, petitioned to secure their lands and to have recognized their rights to gather wood and other forest products from the
nearby mountains. They cited their ancient, colonial titles to the land, mixing this with their claims to have rights in “our Republic.” They closed by noting that their treatment was a “fate of miserable slavery, unworthy of any country truly Catholic and civilized.”

This indigenous village thus combined in one petition the tenets of Catholicism, ancient inheritances, modern rights to petition and justice, and appeals to a civilization that did not allow citizens to be treated as slaves. Although subalterns had no trouble appropriating the discourse of republican modernity, they did not abandon corporate identities, tradition, or the values of an older moral order.

In addition to citizenship, Colombian and Mexican subalterns embraced popular sovereignty. In 1866 a petition from over six hundred Caleños, most of whom could not sign their names and many of whom were Afro-Colombians, demanded the state president immediately suspend a law that imposed a tax on the production and sale of aguardiente. Afro-Colombians, especially many Afro-Colombian women, owed their livelihoods to the small-scale distillation and sale of aguardiente; the tax crippled their ability to survive. The local Democratic Society, led by Peña, took up their cause, urging the state president to act, even though they acknowledged that he had no legal authority to suspend the law. More important than legal niceties, however, was the “popular will” that demanded the law’s abrogation. The Democratic Society argued that in “republican countries” the executive must respond when the pueblo demanded succor, and the state president needed to prove he was a “magistrate fit to lead a free people.” If the legislature expressed outrage at his bypassing its authority, the state president could comfort himself by knowing he enjoyed “an approbation that is more valuable, that of the sovereign pueblo.”

Here, the pueblo asserted that ultimately direct democratic action—in this case, a petition—mattered more than the legislative process of republicanism. As we have seen, politicians and writers regularly referred to the pueblo as sovereign; these Colombians now insisted that the political class abide by its rhetoric.

Notions of popular sovereignty and popular citizenship even allowed Indians to confront Mexican and Colombian Liberals’ hostility to communal landholding. Trinidad García and others from Huimilpan, Querétaro, wrote to state officials in 1856 to reclaim some land unjustly taken from them. They acknowledged that the new government frowned on “pueblos possessing goods in community” but claimed there should be “exceptions.” Their strongest argument was that the governor or president was beholden to them as the nation’s servant: a “republican magistrate” should dedicate himself “to serve the pueblo that elevated him.” Indians did not hesitate
to use Liberals’ discourse against them, even in direct contradiction to Liberals’ economic program. In Colombia in 1871, Indians from the Aldea of Cajamarca similarly wrote to the Cauca state president to insist that their resguardos (communal landholdings) not be divided. They noted that, under colonialism, they had been “beaten down by Spanish greed into the most degrading state of slavery and misery.” But now an “enlightened republican government” ruled, one that “proclaims equality.” Of course, for elite Liberals, equality meant ending resguardos. Yet for Indians, the rule of equality and a republican government signified their new status as citizens who had the power to protect their rights and be heard by the state. Indians from Mocondino, also in the Cauca, expressed confidence that an “essentially democratic government,” in defense of which “we have shed so much blood,” would accede to their wishes not to have their communal lands divided. Of course, dividing resguardos into individual and marketable landholdings was a central component of Liberal ideology, but the contradictions of the democratic system prevented Liberals in the Cauca from ever making much progress in this regard. The pueblo, using rhetoric and force, simply pushed back too hard. Although many historians tend not to take seriously Liberals’ exclamations of popular sovereignty, subalterns certainly did.

Behind these calls of popular sovereignty was the still radical notion that the state had a responsibility to serve the majority instead of the privileged few. A group of “carpenters” petitioned the Banda Oriental government to raise import duties, arguing that “the most civilized governments of the world do not disdain to follow their people’s advice.” In Cali in 1853, poor residents petitioning to claim commons land that haciendas had usurped expressed confidence that since now the Town Council’s members were “directly designated by the pueblo,” the poor could expect justice. Migrants who were settling the frontier between Cauca and Antioquia wrote to the National Congress to ask for help in a land dispute. After the migrants had settled on and cleared lands known as Aldea de María, which they claimed were public, a group of “monopolistas” asserted title to the lands. The migrant petitioners were sure the state would act, “rejecting, as it should reject, the influence of the few” in favor of the needs of thousands of settler families. The settlers noted that they had seen some “aberrations” in the state’s past behavior, but they now were confident that the government would not abandon “two thousand five hundred unfortunate souls to the yoke of their oppressors.” In a democratic republican system, subalterns insisted that the rights of the many outweighed the investments of the few.

Indeed, local elites used similar language themselves and feared openly
contradicting it. In Veracruz in 1848, popular sentiment mobilized against
the tobacco monopoly. Over five hundred people “of all classes” turned out
at a meeting of the Town Council to present a petition demanding the mo-
nopoly’s abolition. The council approved the petition, to the “Vivas!” of the
crowd. The assembled citizens then demanded that the council suspend en-
forcement of the monopoly immediately, while the central state acted on
the petition. The council did not want to do this because the monopoly was
national law, “but considering the dangerous consequences to public tran-
quility” if they did not act, they assured the crowd they would immediately
request the tax administrator to stop enforcing the monopoly. The pueblo
celebrated with an impromptu demonstration, roaming the city with music
and fireworks and climbing church towers to ring the bells in celebration.248
The governor wrote to Mexico City warning that it would be very difficult
to keep the peace if the monopoly were not overturned. He claimed that he
wanted to obey the national government but was caught between the law
and “the opinion and desires of so many in the state.”249 Notions of popular
sovereignty, backed up with popular action, mattered.

As in Veracruz, the pueblo did not just suggest officials accept popular
sovereignty but actively demanded that the state fulfill republicanism’s
promises. After the Revolution of Ayutla, Mexican villages eagerly adopted
that movement’s discourse. A number of villages in Chiapas, partnering
with sympathetic Liberal politicians, petitioned the new national govern-
ment to remove various officials who had served Santa Anna’s regime. The
villagers declared that these officials had served “the dictator,” had created
“misery for a multitude of citizens,” and were therefore unfit to serve a
government with “revolutionary legitimacy.”250 Another hamlet’s letter
complained that Santa Anna’s officials had represented only greedy “arist-
ocrats.” The village had signed on to the Plan de Ayutla in the hope that it
would “save the Nation from the dangers that threatened it” and that with
the revolution’s victory, “misery would turn into abundance, oppression
into liberty.” The letter closed by demanding that the state fulfill “the prom-
ises made to the Nation.”251 The villagers contrasted politicians’ greed with
their desire for progress through good government. Another petition from
residents of the town of Comitán, described how—after adopting the Plan
de Ayutla—the people took it upon themselves to remove Santa Anna’s of-
ficials, who had made “slaves” out of many of the region’s residents. They
asked how could it be fair that a “hard dictatorship reigns in Chiapas while
the rest of the Republic enjoys Liberty.”252 This village employed Liberals’
enshrinement of liberty and the association of reaction with slavery. These
letters echoed that of Angel Corzo, a powerful local Liberal politician, who claimed that the officials in question represented an elite clan that “has become tyrants over the pueblos of Indians of this state.” The pueblo had adopted the Plan de Ayutla and, thus, now had a right to demand satisfaction, as guaranteed in the plan. Corzo’s letter went further than the others, threatening a new uprising if the state were to ignore the “promises of the revolution.” Provincial elites were in an especially close dialogue with their popular neighbors: neither could easily ignore the other, and both groups confronted the national state. If the national state justified itself via a republicanism based on legitimate revolution, popular sovereignty, liberty, and rights, villagers assumed that they had the right to call on the state to fulfill its promises (and if the state did not comply, that they too could rebel). If the state claimed legitimacy through American republicanism, it remained legitimate in subalterns’ eyes only as long as it kept its revolutionary promises.

Subalterns did not hesitate to hold officials’ feet to the fire, demanding the change Liberals had promised in the Revolution of Ayutla. In 1856 villagers from Huimanguillo, Tabasco, claiming status as “citizens,” compared the Liberals’ new government, “so good and just,” with the previous administration, implicitly asking the state to prove this change; they assumed that the new state “is interested in the general welfare of all the inhabitants.” The pueblo of Chico, Veracruz, represented by the renowned orator José María Mata, wrote to the president to complain about Santa Anna directly, who had stolen an image of the Virgin Mary from their church and taken it to his hacienda. They hoped for better treatment from the new government, since “the fall of the dictator has caused Mexicans to enter into the enjoyment of their legitimate rights.” Rafael Cataño, a former guerrilla who had fought in Oaxaca “against the reaction” and was now accused of deserting the army, protested that his rights must be respected or the constitution would be nothing but “weak leaves of paper.”

This was exactly Liberals’ conundrum: would blatant dismissal of subaltern demands reveal their projects of nation and state building as nothing but insubstantial words?

Since Liberal elites defined their societies and justified their rule using American republican modernity’s discourse—the sovereignty of the people, republicanism, democracy, and rights—it became much harder to simply ignore subalterns, who did not hesitate to question the nation’s viability. The Colombian and Mexican states were simply too weak to attempt to rule without some political legitimacy. A petition from over forty residents of Paso del Bobo, Veracruz, most of whom could not sign their names, de-
manded the Liberal state allow them to keep renting from the state—at the same rate—land that had been seized from Santa Anna, from which two other renters had evicted them. The petitioners claimed the intended hacendados wanted “to live by the sweat of the pueblo,” but hoped the new government would look after the rights of “citizens.” The citizens continued: “We expect that neither your Excellency nor the law will permit that the pueblo lives under oppression, as it would be, for us, as if the fight in which our poor Patria is now engaged in order to enjoy Liberty had been lost.” These illiterate citizens thus made a direct connection between revolutions for liberty and their need for land. If their concerns were not heard, then the revolution and the nation-state’s legitimacy, regardless of the outcome of any battle, were already lost.

Subalterns especially expected to be heard if they felt that the nation and state owed them due to their past sacrifices as soldiers. In Uruguay the question of land rents in and around Montevideo became a flash point during the Guerra Grande. Rents incited such passion because the vast majority of Montevideanos did not own property; an 1843 census counted 849 property owners and 4,020 renters. A letter from some Montevideanos demanded that rents be suspended for the war’s duration, especially those owed to the city’s enemies. They warned that while they fought in the civil war, there was also a “war between landlords and renters.” The writers asked how it could be just for those who had sacrificed so much to suffer at the hands of landlords fighting for the enemy. Another letter asked how those “citizens” who had sacrificed for the republic in the war could be subject to “the tyranny of the landlords”? Although the landlords “will invoke the right to property,” the writers argued that if rent payments were suspended for soldiers, they would not be stealing the landlords’ property but only putting limits on “greed and tyranny.” Furthermore, they asserted that the rights to property “are not of the same sacred nature as those of personal labor.” A similar letter from “ten employees of the Republic” also demanded a suspension of rents, asking why landlords’ rights to property should be “inviolable and sacred” while “the labor, personal service and blood” of the renters were not considered so. For popular republicans, the right to one’s labor power mattered more than the more abstract right to property cherished by elite Liberals. This tension between the demands of republicanism for equality (of types of rights) and for fraternity (in time of war) conflicted with liberalism’s concerns for liberty (of property), reflecting the uneasy coexistence of popular republicanism with elite liberalism. In this case, during war, republicanism partly superseded classical liberalism,
and the state temporarily suspended rents (or offered to pay them) for those serving the government.  

During war, Liberal elites celebrated citizen soldiers and their role in the body politic, calling the National Guard “soldiers of democracy” and “armed citizens.” This rhetoric strengthened the citizen-soldier persona, an identity subalterns expropriated in both Colombia and Mexico. Indians from the village of Teremendo, Michoacán, petitioned President Juárez to return land to them that a neighboring hacienda had usurped. They claimed that the hacendado had been allied with the “French forces” that had persecuted the Indians, many of whom had died in the war, due to “our firm adhesion to the national cause.” The hacendado was also Spanish: “We poor Indians still suffer thousands of cruelties from the Spanish, who have remained on our soil, owners of uncounted riches acquired through usury, usurpation and more iniquitous means.” If no action were taken, the Indians threatened to act on their own, intimating a “pernicious disturbance.” This petition echoes the themes of subalterns’ appropriation of American republican modernity: the evil, traitorous rich; the loyal poor who serve the nation; and the right to rebel to ensure justice. National Guard soldiers from the village of Tetela de Ocampo refused to surrender their weapons after a rebellion in 1868, reminding the state that they still enjoyed “rights as free men” whose fellows “were sacrificed while defending republican institutions.” In Colombia the residents of the village of Quilcacé, many of whom were former slaves or descendants of slaves, demanded help from the Liberal state in a land dispute. The petitioners justified their request by reminding Liberal officials of “the services the village made to the cause of the federation [the Liberals in the 1859–62 war] and due to the bloody sufferings that it endured because of its adhesion to that cause.” Soldiering gave even those with little traditional status in the eyes of elite Liberals—in this case, poor and largely illiterate Afro-Colombians—a powerful identity as citizen soldiers from which to make their demands. Similarly, the Palmira Democratic Society petitioned for access to commons and public lands that haciendas had enclosed. The Society reminded the Colombian president that “the poor class” has made “the very valuable contribution of their blood in order to defend our institutions. . . . These individuals have, at the very least, an unquestionable right to be protected by a liberal government.” States ignore their subaltern subjects all the time, but it is harder to do if those states have legitimized themselves via republican revolutions, subalterns have fought in those revolutions, and they still have their rifles and machetes from the revolutions.
Although subalterns eagerly embraced many of the key concepts used to define republicanism, they did not as often engage the concepts of modernity or civilization and progress directly, although some certainly did. In Uruguay soldiers in the Guerra Grande claimed they fought “to sustain civilization and liberty,” implying that civilization was not only elite culture and wealth but had a political component as well.270 Gatherers of forest products near Tumaco wrote to the Colombian president to protest that investors now claimed the forest as private property, complaining that these capitalists wanted to impose the “tyranny of feudalism,” the Middle Ages being a well-known shorthand for backwardness.271 Indians and whites from a couple of villages near Amoles, Querétaro, protesting a confrontation over land that had left three people dead, exclaimed that such violence deserved the “reprobation of the civilized world.”272 Sebastiana Silva petitioned Popayán’s local government for help in the return of her son, who was forced to work as a domestic servant (a not uncommon arrangement for poor children). She demanded her son’s return, but the family where he was in service refused, “as if we still were in the barbarous times in which the government allowed the slavery of men. Today, thankfully, we have a republican and democratic government that will not allow such monstrosities.”273 Silva was poor, illiterate, and a woman, but she still expected a republican and democratic government owed her a response. She cleverly manipulated American republican modernity, equating slavery with barbarism and calling on the state to justify its own claims to democratic, republican legitimacy.

Subalterns were more likely to directly employ the trope of modernity when elites represented them. Juan José Baz, writing for a client in jail because of a debt he owed to a hacienda near Puebla, declared such treatment unsuited to a modern Mexico. He argued that Mexico still suffered from “legacies of feudalism, truly painful for the poorest class of society.” Haciendados loaned money to workers to ensure that they were in debt; if the workers tried to leave, they were hunted down and beaten, as if “a slave.” Baz argued to President Ignacio Comonfort that such cases should be civil matters, not criminal, and suggested that ending such treatment would earn him the thanks of millions, as well as creating “a considerable number of citizens.” Baz closed by arguing that the state must act “in order to end suffering unworthy of civilized man.”274 Baz was a powerful politician in his own right, yet we see how he could bend American republican modernity’s discourse to argue in favor of the poorest class in society—debt peons.

Certainly in the close quarters of small towns, the lower class, middling actors, and provincial elites came together, each influencing the notions of
civilization dominant in the public sphere. The Democratic Society of San Pedro, a parish of Buga, requested that their town remain the provincial capital, justifying their petition by reminding the state of both their service in the past civil war and their “right of sovereignty.” They claimed Buga, unlike its rival, Cartago, had fought for the “emancipation of the masses” and now hoped to enjoy the “fruits of republicanism.” Cartago, meanwhile, was a Conservative town of “barbarians,” nothing but a “den of oligarchs” who had opposed “democratic opinion.” Barbarism had previously been used to describe the poor and uneducated. Now, the Democratic Society recast the antidemocratic oligarchs and wealthy as barbarians. This petition, whose signatories included not only the local priest and officials but also over 160 men (most of whom only made their mark), had turned the world of civilization and barbarism upside down.

Much more directly appealing than notions of modernity were the tropes defining civilization and modernity under American republicanism—republicanism; democracy; popular sovereignty; and the universal extension of citizenship, rights, liberty, equality, and fraternity. Many of the poor and the working class were able to take advantage of this discourse, asserting their citizenship and claiming rights to promote their own agendas, be it to protest unfair monopolies, protect landholdings, demand pensions, or simply participate as equals in the political system. Their claims are now well documented in the state and nation formation literature. How the public sphere envisioned modernity played a key role in determining the effectiveness of subalterns’ claims to citizenship and nation. Subalterns sensed the congruence of their understandings of liberty, equality, and fraternity (which varied across different subaltern groups) with those of American republican modernity. Subalterns could not pretend to be educated in the ways and manners of Europe, and thus they had little to appropriate from Europhile cultural modernity. Western modernity’s focus on order and labor would provide little space for most subalterns, relegating them to being means of production. However, American republican modernity, with its political path to the future, gave them a powerful discourse to make their own. This language of citizenship and rights would not have resonated with discourses of modernity based on technology, high culture, or economic development. Yet for a modernity based on republican freedom, subalterns’ appeals and language carried great weight. In an era when the state was weak to nonexistent and nations were still undefined, elites did not have the power to simply ignore discourses of nation, modernity, and republicanism that were critical to creating a new political sys-
tem. Thus, they could not simply dismiss subaltern claims to citizenship, since the political systems they sat atop rested on American republican modernity’s discourse. If citizenship, rights, and popular sovereignty had no meaning, then the new nations and their elite leaders had no meaning or legitimacy either.

Limits and Contradictions
Once unleashed, popular republicanism would be very hard to rein in again. By the 1870s and 1880s, elites would eventually realize the dangerous threat that American republicanism’s language posed and how little they controlled it. In the projects of the Porfiriato (1876–1910) and the Regeneration (formally dated 1885, but actually beginning earlier), both Mexican and Colombian elites would redefine civilization and modernity to largely exclude subalterns (and a discourse of citizenship and rights) from the political sphere. They would be aided in this endeavor by contradictions within liberalism that opposed American republican modernity’s emancipatory potential.

Liberals were American republican modernity’s greatest proponents, but elite liberalism was a distinct philosophy. Liberalism contained conceptions of the pueblo, Indians, women, order, and economic development that conflicted with much of American republican modernity’s discourse. While discursively inclusive of the poor and often excluding the venal wealthy from the national family, Liberals’ discourse nevertheless maintained a strong sense that the true citizens who must lead the nation belonged to “the middle class of society, where one finds morality and enlightenment.”

Although Liberals often celebrated the pueblo, they did not hesitate to condemn the lower class for its “religious fanaticism,” ignorance, and other bad habits that the poor had inherited from colonialism. Liberals eventually embraced (or nearly did) male universal citizenship, but they had a long history of excluding subalterns; even during the Guerra Grande in Uruguay, when subalterns had immense leverage as soldiers, the still reigning constitution of 1829 did not grant citizenship to servants, day laborers, or enlisted soldiers, and after 1840 it also required literacy. And when citizenship was awarded (as opposed to subalterns’ conception of citizenship as a right), subalterns were expected to know their duties and limits. In spite of its name, El Amigo del Pueblo declared that its program was to inform the pueblo of its rights but also of its “duties,” and that the pueblo must educate itself out of its colonial ignorance in order to obtain the “reason” necessary for civilization. Of course, whenever groups of the lower class opposed Liberals—due to local history, for religious rea-
sons, or in opposition to a particular Liberal policy (which was especially the case with Indians)—Liberals denounced the poor for their abasement and fanaticism.

Reinforcing Liberals’ suspicion of the poor was the long history of racism, especially that of letrados, emerging from the colonial epoch and Europhilic modernity. Many Liberals could never escape the racism that always considered civilization the provenance of white Europeans, while “blacks” and Indians would remain “barbarous” until educated and disciplined. Liberals usually publicly promoted racial universalism in speeches and newspapers, but in their letrado texts—meant for a more refined local or foreign European audience—they pursued a different tact. Miguel Lerdo de Tejada, brother of the future president, published a geographic survey of Mexico in 1856, notably dedicated to Alexander von Humboldt. He deduced that Mexico’s population was one-sixth “pure European,” three-sixths “pure Indian,” and two-sixths “mixed European, Indian and African.” He argued: “This diversity of races that composes the Mexican Republic’s population has been and will be the major obstacle to its prosperity and growth.” In an essay written in Europe that was not published in his lifetime, Juan Baptista Alberdi recanted his faith in the Americas and republicanism, urging the adoption of monarchy, in imitation of Europe. He believed that American republican experiments were doomed due to the lack of European population: Indians could only create a “savage reaction . . . far from being a civilizing movement.” In order to civilize the Americas, one needed European immigration. Another Liberal intellectual, José María Samper—who in his youth, although not his middle age, was a great proponent of American republicanism—did not hesitate in his survey of Colombia to ascribe characteristics to races, especially “mulatos,” many of them virulently negative. He particularly denigrated “zambos,” whose degradation resulted from the “evident inferiority of the mother races”: Indians and Africans. Despite the depth of his racist thought, Samper still had great faith that American civilization and its “democratic society” could benefit from racial mixture, creating a new “race of republicans.” Yet it was clear he imagined Europeans providing spiritual and intellectual qualities, while more physical qualities might come from other races. Publishing in Europe, like so many letrados, Samper embraced geographic and “scientific” thinking on race.

In terms of race, the divide between the public sphere of the salon (where a science-inspired racism reigned) and that of the street (where universalism dominated) appears especially sharp.

However, many Liberals believed all the problems of the pueblo—their
ignorance, fanaticism, culture, laziness, and even race—could be solved by the implementation of a disciplinary program. Although earnestly orating about the triumph of popular sovereignty and democratic republicanism, Liberals often thought only a disciplined, rational pueblo could exercise these rights. An undisciplined pueblo whose members did not follow their elite leaders would undermine the “principle of authority” and lead to “social dissolution.” The great disciplinary tool was education; Liberals often looked to the United States, “our great model,” as an example. Liberals believed that education would make the pueblo rational and restrained citizens, aware of both their rights and duties. A Colombian Liberal official urged action to improve education: “When the democratic form has been established successfully in a pueblo, it is necessary to shape, educate and give to the pueblo, via instruction, the baptism of civilization.” Democracy still intensely frightened the Liberal elite; only education could make the pueblo safe for democracy.

As worrisome as the pueblo was in general, one group posed even more problems for Liberals’ sense of universalism and a unified citizen body. Indigenous people living in semi-autonomous villages, with their own local governments and communal property holdings justified by a colonial legal identity of “indígenas,” threatened liberalism’s economic (private property) and political (individual rational actors as citizens instead of corporate bodies) underpinnings. Certainly, many whites believed that if Indians wanted to be “citizens of a free and independent Republic instead of the vile and abject slaves of a despotic and tyrannical foreign monarch,” they had to renounce their communal landholdings and local self-government. Of course, those hacendados who coveted indigenous communal landholdings exploited a discourse of modernity that equated Indians’ attachment to their traditions with “barbarism.” Nonindigenous residents of Silvia, Colombia—then known as Nueva Granada—petitioned to have the local resguardo divided, arguing that the new republican system guaranteed “equality of rights to all New Granadans”; therefore, Indians should lose their special communal rights to property and government. In this interpretation of universalism, Indians’ identity must be eliminated completely: “To the embarrassment of N.G. [Nueva Granada] within its own territory there today exist, forty-two years after Independence, groups of men with the name ‘communities of Indians.’” Of course, if a pueblo rejected Liberals’ universalism, this marked them as barbarians. Liberals in the Cauca denounced the Pasto region, marked as Indian and religiously benighted, as an area with “little civilization.” In general, as Fernando López-Alves argues, state makers...
imagined a homogeneous nation as ideal, thus casting indigenous peoples especially as a problem.299

Even when Liberal officials hoped to forge some sort of relationship with Indians, their prejudices interfered. The governor of Jalisco, Mexico, wanted to establish a special court to help with land disputes involving those “who are called Indians.” The governor thought that a more accessible judicial system would prevent rebellions and seemed to also hope that such a court would improve indigenous villagers’ conditions, but he could not bring himself to even recognize them as Indians.300 In Colombia, Liberal letrado politicians such as the novelist Jorge Isaacs, even when promising to protect Indians from predatory hacendados, did so as lordly benefactors, bragging that they would come to indigenous villages “diffusing civilization and well-being to their populations.”301 Instead of universal republicanism’s egalitarian promise, elites clung both to the exclusionary rationalizations of a colonial, letrado Europhile modernity that saw Indians only as barbarous impediments and to classical liberalism’s requirement of elite rationality to merit inclusion in the public sphere. Liberals simply could not see Indians as true citizens.302

Even more brutally persecuted, of course, were indigenous peoples, usually on the frontiers, who had not submitted to the national state. When La Alianza de la Frontera celebrated President Juárez’s homage to La Reforma and liberty, it also announced attacks by the Apaches, calling them “barbarous Indians.”303 Indians such as the Yaqui or Maya were condemned as barbarians who wanted to destroy civilization in bloody caste wars.304 From the pampas to the rainforests of Colombia to the North American deserts, these indigenous people faced genocidal violence and total exclusion. Even the most progressive visions of modernity in the nineteenth century could classify them only as the barbarous other.

Although non-Indian women did not face these levels of state violence, they suffered a political exclusion even more complete than that of Indian men. Women’s classification as irrational and fundamentally alien to citizenship was not incidental to liberalism and republicanism, but central. Indeed, as scholars of European and Latin American republicanism stress, liberalism’s reliance on rationality and the establishment of a private, domestic sphere (of women) separate from the political public sphere (of men) actually isolated women politically more thoroughly than they had been under colonial or monarchial rule.305 A Caleño paper noted that elections’ turbulences and disputes were not suited for women, who must therefore be excluded from such scenes. Anyway, the paper cavalierly asserted, if given
the suffrage a woman would vote only according to her husband’s or lover’s desires; lacking a man, “she would give her vote to the most handsome, even if he were dumb as a mule.” Women had no place in the “public plaza” but should attend to their duties of education and motherhood: if women engaged in politics, this would corrupt both politics (introducing irrational actors) and women (turning them away from their domestic responsibilities).

Notions of rationality, masculinity, and honor underlay the identity of citizen at the heart of American republican modernity. Radical republicans mocked Spanish kings as fratricidal (Enrique de Trastámara), foolish (Juan II), tyrannical (Felipe II), idiotic (Carlos II), or female (Isabel II). Liberals thus classified the rule of a woman as little different than that of a despot or moron. For radical republicans, the fact that Europeans tolerated rule by tyrants, the mentally disabled, and women only showed Old World backwardness; given “rational” choices, disciplined male citizens would elect educated, responsible men to representative rule. Nineteenth-century republicanism was gendered as male, with other forms of government coded as female—all the more obvious when female monarchs ruled in England and Spain. American republicanism did not just cast Europeans as feminine but also questioned American Conservatives’ commitment to a male public sphere. Liberals blasted Conservatives for “exploiting the fanaticism of the fairer sex and making them take an active part in politics.” Liberals also assumed that “women’s inclination for monarchy” would lead them to support Conservatives. Women found very little play in masculinized republicanism.

This new republican exclusion combined with the continued importance in the republican era of colonial notions of honor. Sarah Chambers argues that honor became democratized after independence, as poor men could claim to be honorable, but their claims relied on masculine behaviors and controlling wives and daughters. Petra Hinojosa de Gutiérrez and three other women wrote to the commanding officer of Morelia to pledge their “patriotism” and aid to the soldiers who fought against the European invasion. Yet they had to claim that “awakening and enlivening the natural sentiment of liberty and independence” was the work of men; women’s role was to nurture love of the “patria” and to support the soldiers by collecting resources. This is a subtle but fascinating division: men practiced republican politics, while women fostered the more primordial sentiments of national feeling. Of course, universalism has a logic of its own that is hard to deny. Therefore, when discussing women, Liberal men elided universal-
ism’s internal logic by tending to revert to older definitions of modernity, focusing on issues of “culture” and “morality” as central to women’s role in marking “the thermometer of civilization.” In general, gender exclusion made republicanism, which was intimidating due to its challenge of so many traditional hierarchies, seem much less threatening by embracing patriarchal rule. A fairly common formulation was that the family underlay society, which in turn underlay republicanism.

Crucially related to these limitations of class, race, and gender was the central contradiction between American republican modernity and liberalism: the need for capital to create economic development along the lines of the North Atlantic versus republicanism’s political utopia of equality. Countering American republican modernity’s progressive potential throughout the 1850s and 1860s were the competing currents of both a lingering Europhile and an emerging Western modernity, as well as the ideology of elite liberalism to which republicanism was linked, if often uncomfortably. Although American republicanism did not measure modernity in economic terms, it did assume that political modernity would bring economic growth, as defined by elite (but not popular) liberalism. Ideally, the social peace between elites and popular groups that democracy and republicanism should engender would create a more stable economic base than that currently sustaining a feudal Europe riven by class conflict. While Juárez in Mexico and his counterparts in Colombia imagined a modernity that subalterns could seize to promote their claims in the public arena, these Liberal rulers planned an economic future that would doom many subalterns to entrenched poverty, especially Indians losing their collective lands and artisans losing their workshops due to industrial imports.

Whenever Liberals’ discourse moved away from politics to state power or trade, Latin America became removed from the civilized world, once more looking in from the outside. The Colombian Tomás Cuenca, in promoting a controversial canal treaty for Panama, argued that if Colombians refused to make a deal, the English would build the canal elsewhere: “Civilization and the world’s commerce are knocking at our door, and we should hasten to allow them in, before they go elsewhere and leave us without anything but the pain of our indolence.” Even at the height of Colombia’s confidence in its political future, doubts nagged elite Liberals about their true position in the world. Politically, Colombia had created the most modern nation on the face of the earth, but Cuenca, by equating civilization with commerce, returned Colombia to a passive state, waiting for North Americans and Europeans to bring modernity to them. Some fretted that Colombia would cede too
many rights to the English, but Cuenca brushed aside such concerns, saying
that only England—“the center of universal commerce”—had the immense
credit, wealth, “colonial possessions,” and fleet necessary to complete the
project.317 Despite the intense hostility to colonialism in the public sphere,
Cuenca could now present England’s colonies and its imperial impulses to
control the proposed canal as positives, as harbingers of progress.

These tensions had existed since American republican modernity’s emer-
gence. In Uruguay, during the Guerra Grande, the Colorado government had
to reassure landowners that it would limit the amount of land it intended
to expropriate and give to the landless who had served it.318 Elites worried
that the subalterns they needed as allies during the war, such as the former
slaves, might not be so eager to accept their previous lot once hostilities
ended, urging the freedmen to “change your military uniform for the sim-
ple clothing of the laborer.”319 As we have seen, during moments of cri-
ses subalterns used their indispensability to bend liberalism’s tenets, such
as suspending rents on property or even seizing property from traitors for
redistribution.320 Elite Liberals fretted over when and how the state would
restore the status quo of property rights once the war ended.321

In Colombia, moderate Liberals, such as those represented by El Hombre,
often looked back to Europhile modernity, stressing property as a marker
of civilization: “Property is that which has civilized the world and that
which has created sciences, arts, industry and all the physical and moral
improvements.”322 El Hombre accused the more radical El Pensamiento Popular
of inculcating “the poison pill of socialism and communism, gilded with
the pretty words of the masses’ emancipation, unlimited liberty, absolute
equality.”323 If democracy and equality were the measure of modernity, what
would that mean if the pueblo decided equality meant property’s equitable
distribution? In the case of the villagers of Paso del Bobo mentioned above,
who demanded the right to keep renting land at the past rate, the hacenda-
dos confronting them responded by calling the petitioners “criminals” who
had “perverse habits” and preached “the most detestable doctrines against
work and property.”324 The Juárez regime was caught between the contradic-
tions of its emancipatory discourse and its desires for capitalist economic
development.

Questions of order were equally troubling. Certainly, the destruction of
the War of the Reform caused many to doubt Mexico’s future, at least for
the moment.325 Although revolution trumped order in much public debate,
especially during the French Intervention, as Florencia Mallon has noted
concerning plebeian soldiers and national life, a reaction quickly occurred.
In early 1868 the politician and writer Francisco Zarco urged Mexico to show the world that the nation could now follow “the path of order and progress.” The diplomat Manuel María de Zamacona was more direct, insisting that force be employed immediately to punish bandits and deter crime, as part of a more general disciplinary project. In only a few years, Zamacona’s and Zarco’s words would seem less like an anomaly and more like part of the dominant discourse of modernity—not just in Mexico, but eventually throughout most of Latin America.

However, we should not assume that this economic liberalism made American modernity meaningless. While La Reforma’s economic program was a precursor to Porfirio Díaz’s regime, simply ignoring the importance of the political and the discourse of modernity obscures both why Juárez’s economic program failed and why political life and visions of the future had to change so significantly under the Porfiriato. Of course, the Spanish American public sphere could not help but marvel at the technological achievements of the age: “the century of steam power, of electricity, of enlightenment.” Elites fretted about disorder, socialism, popular demands, and unruly plebeians’ influence in a democratic system. Yet for all these concerns, political considerations still dominated modernity’s definitions in the public sphere. After midcentury, American republicanism was more powerful than economic liberalism in both Colombia and Mexico. Even as some Liberals worried about the lack of economic development, there was a confidence in the public sphere that such material concerns were not true measures of civilization and that eventually American republican modernity would produce the long-awaited economic prosperity (if not imagined by many subalterns as necessarily individual, as opposed to more fraternal, prosperity). In spite of classical liberalism’s doctrines that citizenship could only emerge from the rational, male property holder produced by capitalist economies, the radical republican and subaltern adherents to American republican modernity insisted that citizenship came first; it was a right of primordial importance. For republicans, politics created the citizen; for Liberals, economics did. Yet during this era, it was the political that triumphed, and the political that defined modernity and the future.

Of course, middle-class and elite republicans yearned for affluence and capitalist development. However, they could not escape the contradiction between the necessities of capitalist development and the political space opened up by American republican modernity. Ultimately, the contradiction could not be resolved; for the economic program to achieve some success, American republicanism’s political and social project would have to be sub-
sumed. The Colombian Regeneration’s and the Mexican Porfiriato’s political projects sought to control popular political demands precisely in order to satisfy capital’s needs. Concomitantly, their cultural and intellectual projects sought to replace American republican modernity with Western modernity as the prime orientation of the public sphere. By the 1880s both the Porfiriato and, to a lesser extent, the Regeneration would succeed in doing so.

In the 1860s and even 1870s this future was not yet clear, as American republican modernity still held sway in the public sphere. Returning to Chile’s El Ferrocarril that opened this chapter, the paper argued that Europe was really not that wealthy anyway, especially if one traveled beyond its great cities, and that it was doomed to be poor due to its political system: “Therefore, one can say with certainty that in Europe while there is poverty there will be despots, that both evils coexist, and that the latter will only disappear if the former does as well.”331 While elite writers aligned with “Western modernity” tended to equate modernity and civilization with economic wealth and high culture, American republican modernity’s quotidian language focused on the achievement of the most modern political systems—meaning those republics that guaranteed the most rights to the greatest number of people. As President Manuel Mallarino of Colombia (then New Granada) asserted, “The Granadan people, if not as prosperous and powerful as others whose existence measures centuries, is without a doubt as free as any in the New or Old Worlds.”332 This discourse of American republican modernity profoundly and powerfully shaped both elites’ efforts at nation and state making and subalterns’ struggles to make these new nations and states their own.