Colonial Models for New World Spaces: French Reflections on Mexico, 1830s-1860s

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In 1827, Gabriel-Jacques Laisné de Villevêque, a liberal member of the Chamber of Deputies, advised the government of Charles X to attack forcefully the dey of Algiers. It would be three years before the king heeded the advice. But in the meantime Laisné de Villevêque, who had published a brochure in 1801 calling on France to recover Louisiana from Spain, developed a plan to establish a French agricultural colony in Mexico. At the time, Bourbon France, in deference to Bourbon Spain, had still not officially recognized Mexico’s independence, achieved six years earlier. But businessmen in French port cities viewed the new nation’s markets as “a fine compensation for all our colonial losses,” and a commercial treaty was signed in 1827. Henri Baradère, a priest who had done missionary work in Senegal and who was preparing to study the ruins of the Aztec empire, became Villevêque’s agent for the Mexican project. He went to Mexico in 1827 and soon obtained a concession from the Mexican government of 300 square leagues around Coatzacoalcos, an area near the Gulf coast south of Veracruz. A prospectus for the project hailed the area’s natural resources, fertility, salubrity and commercial potential, and pointed to Île Bourbon and Bengal as models for its own plan to use a combination of free and indentured labor.

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French labor for the colony in Mexico. Meanwhile, as French emigrants made their way hopefully to Veracruz, Laisné de Villevêque (whose son was then serving as vice-consul in Acapulco) spoke of annexing the Duchy of Parma and compensating its ruler with a Mexican crown, one of numerous French schemes in the 1820s and 1830s to install a European prince in Mexico. However, by 1830 colonists were returning from Mexico with horrifying reports about the colony’s deadly fevers, and the project soon failed. In an account of the affair published in 1837, a survivor hoped the now-seven-year-old Algerian expedition would compensate for the failure of Coatzacoalcos. It would seem that the story of Coatzacoalcos tells us as much about a connected history of empires old and new as it does about the French experience in independent Mexico.

That experience entered a new phase in 1862 when French troops arrived in Mexico for an “expedition” and occupation that would last five years. The intervention led some contemporaries to think of colonial situations. The anonymous author of a pamphlet published in 1864 hoped that Mexico would become France’s India, and serve as a safety valve for the unemployed. Mexican lawyer and politician Manuel Siliceo feared that his country would become another Algeria, permanently ruled over by France, although he ended up serving in Maximilian’s government. However, historians of the French intervention in Mexico have generally not framed it within a colonial rubric. They have described it as a struggle between European monarchy and American republic, as a chapter in Napoleon III’s international relations, and as an

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4 Colenie du Guazacoalco dans l’état de Vera-Cruz, au Mexique. Projet de société, en commandite par actions (Paris: Imprimerie de J. Tastu, 1829?).
5 Michaud, s.v. “Lainé de Villevêque”; Barker, French Experience in Mexico, 27.

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exceptional “adventure” reflecting the emperor’s idiosyncrasies. Moreover, even when studied in the context of traveler’s colonizing discourse, the history of French ambitions in Mexico has escaped the usual narratives of French colonial history. It is absent from most surveys of the French colonial empire.

Of course, Napoleon III did not set out to annex Mexico, and Mexico did not become another Algeria. Although they waged war against president Benito Juárez and his forces, French troops did not inflict the same level of violence in Mexico as they did in Algeria, nor did they dispossess Mexicans of their land. While the French army was actively involved in the creation of first a regency government and then an empire with Maximilian of Austria as its head, it respected the prerogatives of these governments, which were keen on asserting their autonomy. And yet, many of the French officers and troops who served in Mexico had seen action in Algeria (and in Crimea and Italy). Like Algeria (and Egypt before), the intervention had a scientific component; the voyagers selected for the Commission scientifique du Mexique had experience in Madagascar, Egypt, Crimea, and Algeria. On a quite different note, and largely out of public view, the intervention allowed France to requisition a significant amount of silver from mines in Sonora, and gave rise to an array of French settlement and development schemes that recall that of Laisné de Villevêque’s of the late 1820s.

Moreover it is worth recalling that the decision to annex and settle Algeria came several years after the initial invasion in 1830.

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But it is not only the intervention itself that needs to be cast in larger contexts. From the 1830s onwards French observers of Mexico imagined it as one of countless sites around the globe for the non-coercive extension of European commerce, investment, and settlement. However, they also referenced specific colonial and imperial precedents—Spain in the New World, Britain in India, the United States in North America, France in Algeria—as they speculated on the future of Mexico and on a possible French role in the region. Mexico’s own colonial legacy as well as its potential as a site for some sort of French investment, settlement, influence, or rule led these observers to draw lessons from contemporary and past colonies. To some extent, the modeling went in the other direction, with Mexico (or Spanish rule in Mexico) serving as inspiration for ideas about French rule in Algeria. These references can tell us something about the inter-colonial experiences of French observers in the early and mid-nineteenth century. They can also help us probe the meaning of empire during a period that historians of French colonialism have, apart from Algeria, tended to neglect. As several scholars have recently argued, officials and intellectuals found numerous ways to preserve, reinvent, and expand empire in post-revolutionary France. 16

My entry into these connections and imaginings will be through the engineer and economist Michel Chevalier (1806-79), a key figure in the Saint-Simonian movement from 1830 to 1833, chair of political economy at the Collège de France from 1840, and an important advisor to Napoleon III on economic matters during the Second Empire. Chevalier wrote frequently on Mexico from the time he visited the country in 1835, through the 1860s when he published

several works explaining and justifying the expedition to Mexico. For Chevalier, Mexico evoked a range of colonial experiences past and present and a range of possibilities for France.

In 1835, towards the end of his government-sponsored mission to study railways in the United States, Chevalier spent two months in Mexico. His letters describe a country of great beauty, bountiful nature, and abundant minerals. “Everything in this country strikes the European with a profound character of originality and peculiar novelty,” he wrote, especially the Indians, “the base of the population,” “ardent and fanatical” Christians, “marked by that melancholy particular to the red race.” Reflecting the Saint-Simonian fascination with a reconciliation between East and West, Chevalier marveled over Mexico’s geographical position, astride two oceans and halfway between Europe and China. Political boundaries did not seem to matter very much to him as he mused on Mexico’s future: “If the universe should ever be reunited into a single empire” by virtue of railroads and steamboats, he wrote, “the capital should be in Mexico.” However, Chevalier also described a country of incessant “revolutions,” widespread insecurity, neglected fields and unproductive mines. In many ways, Mexico was worse off now than it was before independence.

Indeed, a good share of Chevalier’s letters from Mexico consisted of a sustained defense of Spain’s colonial record at a time when most observers, following eighteenth-century critiques, were quick to condemn it. While acknowledging that Spaniards had committed atrocities in the Caribbean and Peru, Chevalier argued that the conquistadors effectively established law and order in Mexico without indiscriminate violence, by using clergy rather than arms, by showing flexibility in accommodating Christian beliefs to indigenous ones, by granting the Indians certain rights and autonomy, and by intermarrying with them. “Never was a grander work accomplished and maintained for


19 Ibid., 7 August 1837, 3-4.

centuries with such weak military means.”

A conscientious crown “proceeded sagely and surely to bring civilization to the Indians, [and] extended the conquest in the fashion of the Senate of Rome.” Chevalier had much praise for pre-conquest indigenous society, but believed that the Indians gained “in intelligence and morality, in liberty and well-being,” because of their contact with the Europeans and above all Christianity. The civilization that the Spaniards organized in Mexico is not a hothouse civilization, destined to perish after having flourished for a few hours,” he wrote. “It is a branch of Europeanism profoundly grafted on the vigorous trunk of the most energetic of the red races.” The civilizing attempts by the French in Canada and Louisiana, who did little more than make friends with the Indians; by the English, who drove the Indians away; and more recently by the inhabitants of the United States, whose attempts were hasty and superficial, paled in comparison.

Chevalier considered Spain’s far-reaching and enduring record in Mexico to be a worthy one to emulate in Algeria. If France displayed half of the wisdom, foresight and perseverance in Algeria that Spain had shown in Mexico, he argued, “we would soon have at our doors the most admirable of colonies and we would assure ourselves the honor of having initiated the refined civilization of Europe to the Muslim peoples.” Chevalier did not say what specific policies or course of action in Algeria might be needed to achieve this, nor did he discuss the significant differences between the two colonial encounters. However, his embrace of the Spanish record involved a vision of colonial society that was more attentive to the fate of indigenous peoples than the white settler scenarios for Algeria that were modeled on the United States.

Chevalier returned to France in 1835, and published Lettres sur l’Amérique du Nord the following year to critical acclaim. Although he did not include his material on Mexico in this volume, which dealt almost exclusively with the United States, his introduction suggested a far-flung overseas mission for France. Building on his “Mediterranean System” of 1832, which proposed a...

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22 Ibid., 1 August 1837, p. 3.
23 Ibid., 15 August 1837, p. 3.
24 Ibid.
25 Ibid., 1 August 1837, 3.
network of railroads, steamships, telegraph lines, and banks linking North Africa and Southwest Asia to Europe, Chevalier situated the colonization of the Americas and the rise of “Anglo-America” within the broader global story of the merging of East and West, a union that would realize “the association of all peoples... true catholicism... the most harmonic balance of the two opposing natures... the complete encyclopedia... [and] a definitive plan for the exploitation of the globe.” This fateful encounter was imminent because of the West’s clear superiority in wealth, technology, government, and warfare. Indeed, the “association” that Chevalier had in mind was an expansive West overwhelming an inert East.  

27 This vision was tempered by Chevalier’s concern that the Latin “peoples” of Europe, formerly preeminent, were lagging behind the Germans in the work of global expansion. As leader of the Latin group, France needed “to wake [the Latin peoples] from the lethargy into which they are plunged in both hemispheres.” In contrast to those who want “to limit the circle of French influence, and reduce it to the southern countries of Western Europe,” he stated that “France seems called upon to exercise a benevolent and fruitful patronage over the peoples of South America, who are still unable to provide for themselves.” Furthermore, by educating and lifting up “the Arabs,” a task for which France’s recent experience in Egypt and Algiers made it well suited, France would play a role as mediator between East and West.  

28 For Chevalier, this overseas activity was important for France’s own health: “one of the conditions of order and well-being for this country, for our noble France, consists in scattering its ardent youth over the world in the name of science and arts, if not to found new empires.”  

29 Chevalier had opened up a new space through which the French could assert moral claims over Spanish American peoples. Many followed his lead.  

30 A study of French emigration from 1840 that quoted Lettres sur l’Amérique du Nord on the cover page viewed the movement of French people to the New World as part of the larger current of “civilization of science and peace” moving from east to west. If the United States was well on its way to fulfilling this mission, “South America, guided by France, will be still more beautiful; it will join a more noble intellectual development to the teachings of material well being.” France, wrote this author, is “the most intimately predestined to guide the

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nations of this new world in the progress for which they are avid but which they are unable to organize.”

In 1845, in response to the annexation of Texas by the United States, the socialist Victor Considérant argued in his newspaper La Démocratie pacifique, that France should intervene: “In America, two distinct races find themselves head to head: the Saxon race and the Hispano-Latin race; the first in an ascendant movement, and the second on the contrary given over to stagnation, which can become mortal. France thus should intervene in order to defend and reanimate the weaker race.”

Around the same time, Chevalier launched the next phase of his New World career, drawing the attention of French readers to the lucrative economic opportunities awaiting enterprising Europeans in Mexico and Central America. The region’s ideal geographical location needed to be exploited and its immense resources developed and put into circulation. He published lengthy articles on New World gold and silver mines, and on the flourishing global trade and regional development that would result from the construction of a canal, a staple Saint-Simonian concern, through Central America. Shortly after the appearance of Chevalier's article on Panama in 1844, Louis-Napoleon himself published a pamphlet announcing his involvement in a canal project in Nicaragua. He argued that the development of the region by means of a canal would result in “a balance of power, by creating in Spanish America a new centre of active enterprise, powerful enough to give rise to a great feeling of nationality, and to prevent, by backing Mexico, any further encroachment from the north.”

Spain’s legacy also continued to shape Chevalier’s understanding of Mexico and France. In 1845 he published an essay on Mexico’s civilization before the Spanish conquest and another on the conquest itself. These essays were occasioned by William H. Prescott’s widely acclaimed History of the Conquest of Mexico (1843). Both Prescott and Chevalier portrayed an advanced indigenous society that was nevertheless overwhelmed by European power. Both

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31 S. Dutot, De l’expatriation, considérée sous ses rapports économiques, politiques et moraux, ouvrage dédié au Roi (Paris: Arthus Bertrand, 1840), 322.
32 “Política que debería observar la Francia en la presente cuestion de Tejas,” El Siglo Diez y Nueve, 24 April 1845.
34 N. L. B., Canal of Nicaragua, or a Project to connect the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans by means of a canal (London: Mills and son, 1846), 6-7.
romanticized the conquest’s epic nature, and contrasted the heroics of Cortez and his men to the irresolution of Montezuma. However, whereas the U.S. historian highlighted the contrast between the despotism and obscurantism of Catholic Spanish America and the liberties enjoyed by Protestant Anglo-America, Chevalier insisted on the central role of religion as a crusading ideology that moved the sixteenth-century Spaniards and gave the conquest “its true character.” Rarely had history provided examples of such singular force, he said, resulting in such a thoroughgoing domination and transformation of a people. However, Chevalier’s understanding of Catholicism also expressed ambivalence. He said that Catholicism was responsible for Mexico’s “rapid decay, and equally rapid possible regeneration.” Mexico would either regress and “undergo a new conquest by a Protestant race which promises to itself the empire of the world,” or it would “remain free, and progress in the pathway of civilization.”

The U.S.-Mexico War from 1846-48 confirmed his fears that this former Spanish colony, fruit of a brutal but successful process of conversion and assimilation, could not long survive without outside help.

By the time Napoleon III decided to intervene in Mexico in 1861, the country had been a topic for various French colonial fantasies for forty years. The ostensible aim of the expeditionary force that arrived in Veracruz at end of 1861 was to address “the series of insults and violence” directed against French citizens in Mexico, and to force Mexico to fulfill its international obligations. But as Chevalier explained in the *Revue des deux mondes* in April 1862, the exercise was expected “to overthrow the system of government” in Mexico and replace it with “a perfectly independent monarchy, as liberal as possible.” The intervention was thus a state-building mission marked by “evident disinterestedness” that would allow Mexico, which “is today among the civilized peoples that which we call a non-value,” to become stable and prosperous. The occupation would be temporary, Chevalier explained, and would leave the choice of government to the people of Mexico. French interests would be served by checking U.S. power, including the expansion of slavery southward, and by preserving “Latin” civilization in the region.

However, while making the case for “protecting” Mexico, Chevalier drew attention to other colonial undertakings. For example, he noted that this was not

the first time that “armed men” had arrived in Veracruz with sights set on Mexico City—Cortez preceded them. He reiterated that Mexico’s climate was ideal for Europeans, and that the high plateau presented a more beneficial topography than low-lying Senegal and Niger. He once again pointed to its location astride two oceans. A revived Mexico would be able to carry on relations with “the great and populous empires of Asia,” whose doors had been pried open, and with colonies in the Pacific formed by “the enterprising genius of the European race,” i.e. Australia, California, New Caledonia, and so on. Europeans, wrote Chevalier approvingly, believed “that the terrestrial globe is the patrimony of the sons of Japhet... that it belongs to them to interfere in the affairs of the peoples of eastern civilization and to overthrow the barriers that they persist in surrounding their routine and their vanity.” On the other hand, Chevalier clearly regarded Mexico itself in a different category: as a regenerated state that already possessed Western civilization and had “an almost complete absence of Blacks,” it would be poised to capitalize on the growing exchanges with Asia.

Chevalier’s participation in the expedition’s scientific component reveals similar ambiguities. Just as roads, bridges and aqueducts forever marked Rome’s far-flung dominion, Chevalier hoped that France’s “flag will leave similar traces of its passage in Mexico.” It was therefore “desirable, in order to maintain the renown of our country, that the French expedition to Mexico be accompanied, as soon as possible, by a scientific exploration of that vast country, where everything is marked by a particular cachet.” In Chevalier’s view, the recent Franco-British expedition to China suffered without a significant scientific auxiliary. When Napoleon III created the Commission scientifique du Mexique in 1864, officials highlighted its remarkable symmetry with the first Napoleon’s Egyptian campaign of 1798.

As the commission was drawing up its program to study plant and animal species, ancient ruins, native languages and the like, Chevalier counseled it to be more utilitarian. He urged the inclusion of a metallurgist (“because of the country’s silver mines which are... the most productive of the World”), an agriculturist, a technologist, an economist, and a doctor. He also thought that the exploration of a canal route should be part of the commission’s agenda. The

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42 Ibid., 900.
43 Chevalier, Le Mexique, 513.
45 Archives Nationales, F-17-2909, Chevalier to Duruy, Lodève Hérault, 16 February 1864.
official program published a few weeks later featured both mineral wealth ("the billions that for three centuries Mexico has delivered to Europe are only the first fruits of the treasures that it reserves for it") and canal rather prominently and stated that the expedition would be as "useful to commerce as to science." Soon afterwards, the opposition newspaper _Le Temps_ suggested that the project was too preoccupied with precious metals, and more suited to ameliorating France’s grim financial state than serving the natural sciences. While the Commission insisted that it never entertained any “shadow of a preoccupation foreign… to the purely scientific idea” that drove the project, not even for “a single minute,” and that there was nothing “Machiavellian” about studying Mexico’s resources, at Chevalier’s suggestion it dropped plans to hire a voyager for political economy and turned down certain projects promoting French investment and immigration in Mexico that came its way. Nevertheless, traces of French colonizing interests made their way into its official record. One of its correspondants, vice-consul and longtime resident of Chihuahua Roger-Dubos, reported that some of Chihuahua’s mines were prospering under French ownership or management. The only thing lacking “to exploit all this wealth” was “capital, security, and some years of peace,” all of which might come with the “consolidation of the new Mexican empire.”

The vice-consul also reported on Chihuahua’s cotton production. Cotton cultivation in the area had taken off in the 1830s when a Frenchman began practicing it; more recently it was being stimulated by the price rise resulting from the U.S. Civil War. Roger-Dubos made clear that labor costs in Chihuahua were extremely low, much cheaper than Algeria, and that Chihuahua did not have a debilitating tropical climate. Thus, even for the scientists, it was difficult to stake out terrain that was truly “disinterested.”

Alfred Mercier, a physician from New Orleans, also drew connections between Algeria and occupied Mexico. Like Chevalier, Mercier viewed the expedition to Mexico as an opportunity to check Anglo-Saxon expansionism and protect Mexico in the name of pan-Latinism. But, like many French scientists he viewed “the fusion of races in Mexico, Central America and South America as an

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agent of decadence.” He therefore advised the following steps for the Latin American countries: “that the old aristocracy of the white race strongly reconstitute itself, that the population of pure European origin retake the direction of affairs, and that the descendants of the Indians and Africans be classed according to their aptitudes.” Mercier explained that “it is not a matter here of proscribing entire races, of violently expelling them from the heart of society and even the soil, as the Americans of New England and of the Northwest have done with regard to the Red-Skins and the Blacks.” Rather, he had in mind Algeria, a place that demonstrated that “Peoples of different origin can be juxtaposed, live in peace, help each other.” For Mercier, Algeria was an appropriate social model for a multiracial but segregated “Latin America” in league with France and the Confederacy.51

Many models and images of conquest, colonization, development, and expansion were available to the French as they thought about Mexico. Chevalier updated and racialized Enlightenment visions of the power of commerce and “civilization” to transform the world. But he also reached for the older and formerly controversial model of Spain in the New World, which seemed appropriate for French ambitions in Algeria, then as a prelude to a new sort of French presence in Mexico, a presence that was understood as both a disinterested civilizing mission that would check the imperial ambitions of the United States, and a lucrative exercise in the extraction of wealth. If Mexico’s legacy of assimilation had lessons for France as it pondered how to govern the Muslim population of Algeria in the 1830s, French Algeria’s segregated spaces came to mind as France considered how to intervene in Mexico in the 1860s. Perhaps these real and imagined colonial connections and Chevalier’s relentless “mission creep” suggest that distinctions between formal and informal empire are not always useful.