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El Azote que hoy nos amaga : cholera, reaction and insurrection in Mexico, 1833

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EL AZOTE QUE HOY NOS AMAGA:
CHOLERA, REACTION, AND INSURRECTION IN MEXICO, 1833

A Thesis
Presented to
The Office of Graduate Studies
San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

By
Paulo Morgan Simões de Carvalho
DECEMBER, 1996

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ABSTRACT

EL AZOTE QUE HOY NOS AMAGA: CHOLERA, REACTION, AND INSURRECTION IN MEXICO, 1833

by Paulo Morgan Simões de Carvalho

This thesis is a study of the cholera epidemic of 1833 in Mexico City. Primary sources consulted were drawn from the Sutro and Bancroft collections of the California State Library. They include personal accounts, newspapers and pamphlets published in Mexico City at the time. Evidence will show that attempts to understand cholera--its origin, containment and cure--became mired amid political debate and were ideologically charged. Separate chapters address the social conditions that gave rise to the epidemic, the manner in which the disease was used as a weapon to discredit the liberal policies of Valentín Gómez Farías, and the impact it had on the many conservative-backed revolts against his federalist government.

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ABBREVIATIONS

BLC *Bancroft Library Collection*

SPC *Sutro Pamphlet Collection*

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

On June 12, 1833, the Mexico City newspaper *La Antorcha* announced the arrival of cholera in the provincial city of Tampico, northeast of the Mexican capital. The paper forewarned that compared to the myriad armed revolts taking place in the countryside at the time, and the death and destruction they produced, cholera posed a much greater threat to the nation's well-being. "Whereas in one battle, two or three thousand men may die," the paper reported, "in one day cholera could produce equally devastating results."¹ Striking a pessimistic, foreboding note, the editors of the conservative paper predicted that, in spite of any attempts to stop the disease's progress through the art of science and government, "*el azote que hoy nos amaga*" (the lashing that threatens us today) would produce thousands of deaths. Extrapolating the climbing death rate from cholera's first days in Tampico, the paper estimated that in Mexico City alone as many as 18,600 inhabitants could succumb to the

¹*La Antorcha*, 12 June 1833, 4.

disease; for the nation at large their estimate was proportionately higher at close to 800,000.² The best defense against cholera's onslaught (*el furor del azote*), the editors recommended, was "a prudent and moderate lifestyle, the avoidance of intoxicating drinks, and confidence in the Lord God and the Virgin of Anáhuac."³

Cholera is viewed by many social historians as the classic epidemic disease of the nineteenth century. Its deadly record diminished the fame of both smallpox and typhoid of the previous centuries. Its prominence and ability to thrive in large urban areas has led some to dub it as the first "modern" disease.⁴ For the student of nineteenth-century Mexican history, the cholera epidemic of 1833 and the newspaper accounts and pamphlet literature it inspired offer an enticing panorama of Mexican society a decade after independence.

This thesis will focus on the political circumstances and social conditions of post-independence Mexico during the time of cholera. It will show that attempts to understand cholera--its origin, containment and cure--became mired in

²Ibid.

³Ibid. Anáhuac is synonymous with Mexico and refers to the fertile valley in which Mexico City lies.

⁴Charles E. Rosenberg, *Explaining Epidemics and Other Studies in the History of Medicine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 112.

the political debates of the day and were more often than not ideologically charged. As subsequent chapters will demonstrate, the disease became a sort of metaphor for the characteristic instability and condition of Mexico at the time. Sources consulted include travel accounts, personal journals, and newspapers and pamphlets published in Mexico City (the focus of this study) during the summer months of 1833, the period when cholera struck the nation for the first time.

Newspapers of the 1830s in Mexico were highly politicized, reflecting the journalistic revolution that had proceeded and accompanied the movement toward independence a decade earlier. The same conditions applied to pamphlets. The latter often served as reactionary tracts for competing conservative and liberal interests.⁵ Some of the most prolific pamphleteers of the time were politically active figures that made good use of public print to slander and sway political and popular opinion. Often anonymously written and clandestinely sold, depending on levels of censorship, they catered to and targeted the middle and

⁵Stanley C. Green, *The Mexican Republic: The First Decade, 1823-1832* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1987), 94.

lower, partially literate classes.⁶ As one historian has noted:

Coming out frequently in serial form, touching on the most current social and political issues, often written in dialogue form using popular street expressions, and dealing with personalities rather than abstractions, the popular pamphlet was a development unexpected and lamented by the traditional literate minority.⁷

Cholera entered Mexico during the short-lived presidential administration of the liberal statesman, Valentín Gómez Farías. As this study will detail, many conservative reactionaries used the disease's successes to discredit the liberal reforms of his federalist government. The Catholic Church in particular, which saw its wealth come under steady attack during his brief tenure in office, made quick use of the ravages of cholera to put forth reactionary propaganda claiming the disease was divine punishment directed at the liberalism of the state.

By looking at personal journals, newspapers and pamphlets published during Gómez Farías' administration, the historian is offered an unique and revealing window on Mexican society in the 1830s. Cholera was used as a tool by political factions of both liberal and conservative

⁶Ibid.

⁷Ibid., 96.

persuasion to influence public opinion and action. It provided for quarreling factions a strong symbol of the many ills afflicting Mexico at the time.

This study will begin with a brief panorama of the Mexican political environment between independence and 1833. It will place the liberal administration of Valentín Gómez Farías within the context of the political debates of the day.

The focus of Chapter 3 is the physical and social conditions in Mexico City that gave rise to the epidemic of 1833. This chapter will also address how cholera's proliferation was viewed by many as a problem of public sanitation and infrastructure. Alternatively, Chapter 4 will discuss how cholera came to be seen by some as a problem reflecting the poverty and morality of the public body, particularly that of the urban underclass.

Chapter 5 will show how conservative reaction to Gómez Farías' liberal reforms picked up on the havoc caused by cholera and used it as an effective weapon against his efforts to curb the power of the Church. It will illustrate how the disease became woven into the conservative and clerical rhetoric of the age, and how such rhetoric impacted popular perception of the disease's causation.

Chapter 6 will discuss the impact of cholera on the turbulent political situation in Mexico in 1833. It will

demonstrate how the epidemic provided an impetus to the many conservative-backed revolts (*pronunciamientos*) that arose against Gómez-Farías' government. The degree to which cholera facilitated or hindered the success of those uprisings, and the ability of the central government to marshal forces to combat them, will also be assessed.

CHAPTER 2

MEXICO, 1833

Cholera first struck Mexico during a formative time. As was true of most of Spanish America, the efficiency and order of Bourbon rule was replaced at independence by a struggle for political power among colonial elites. In 1833, the Mexican creole elite, heirs to the Spanish colonial bureaucracy, was still grappling with basic questions of nation building. Chief among them was the form of government the newly-independent state would adopt. Generally speaking, opinion was divided between two camps. On the right were the Conservatives, many formerly pro-Spanish, who largely favored preserving the *status quo* of the colonial era and the political and economic *fueros* (corporate privileges) of the Church and military. Having earned themselves the sobriquet of the *Escoseses* (after the Scottish Mason rite), they argued for a centrist, static solution to the administration of state. Their ideal of good government was a constitutional monarchy fashioned after the English Parliamentary model of the age. Having considered themselves "liberal" during the colonial period, after independence many *Escoseses* became

conservative citizens in the face of republicanism from below. In the words of one historian, "Born to status and comfort, they came to value order and security of property over the Enlightenment ideals that had touched their consciences as young men."¹

The Conservatives' represented the traditional elite class in Mexico, or *hombres de bien*. Their rallying point were the *fueros*, and their ranks were mostly filled by large landowners and merchants, clergy, and military officers. Their chief ideologue was Lucas Alamán, a landowner, mine administrator, statesman and historian from Guanajuato.² Although Alamán favored a monarch of European extraction to rule Mexico, by the 1830s he was willing to accept a military dictatorship as the least undesirable alternative to the chaos that had begun to characterize post-independence Mexican politics.³ As the leader of the Conservatives, Alamán saw the Church as "the only force capable of

¹Green, 32.

²Alamán was the son of a Spaniard from Navarre who had acquired considerable wealth in the mining industry. His mother was creole, "the fifth marchioness of San Clemente [and] could trace her lineage back to one of the champions of Queen Isabela" (Ibid., 110). His five volume *Historia de Méjico* is a considered the centerpiece of nineteenth-century Mexican historiography.

³Henry Bamford Parkes, *A History of Mexico* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1960), 192.

countering the influence of rabble-rousing liberals over the Indian and mestizo masses."⁴

To the left of the Escoseses were the Liberals, or *Yorkinos*, who subscribed to a North American brand of Masonic thought imported to post-independence Mexico by the first U.S. minister, Joel R. Poinsett.⁵ More urban and bourgeois in opinion, the *Yorkinos* looked to the United States for their political and economic formulas. They argued for a federalist system of government and free trade to guarantee against the potential despotism of a centrist state. Above all, they opposed the corporate privileges inherent in former colonial institutions and despised the intellectual and economic grip the Catholic Church held on the nation.

The ideological guru of the Liberals was José María Luis Mora, a professor of theology from the state of Mexico. Mora's reformism drew its inspiration from the Spanish Bourbon era.⁶ Its chief target was the political and

⁴Tulio Halperín-Donghi, *The Contemporary History of Latin America*, edited and translated by John C. Chasteen (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 96.

⁵Justo Sierra, *The Political Evolution of the Mexican People*, translated by Charles Ramsdell (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1969), 193.

⁶Under Charles III, Spain attempted to revitalize the colonial economies by reasserting the state's authority in economic matters at the expense of the Church's entrenched interests. For a detailed study see Nancy M. Farriss, *Crown and Clergy in Colonial Mexico, 1759-1821: The Crisis of Ecclesiastical Privilege* (London: The Athlone Press, 1968).

economic power of the Church. It centered on such delicate subjects as the *patronato* (the former Crown's prerogative to appoint clerics), the tithes and the Church's influence over public education. Above all, Mora sought to extinguish the power of the Church over the state. However, in the words of one historian, his program was constantly plagued by the Church's ability to abuse the superstitions of the people who could so "easily be led to believe that religious beliefs and clerical pretensions were one and the same."⁷ In fact, as Chapter 5 will show, throughout the summer of 1833, while the government of Gómez Farías was pushing forth legislation to appropriate the clergy's wealth, the Church drew heavy fuel from the cholera epidemic to sway the superstitious public into believing that the disease's presence was Providential in origin, designed to punish the newly-founded federalist state for its increasingly anti-clerical policies.

In sum, the conservative-liberal schism that existed in Mexican society after independence was one largely based on wealth, class, ethnicity and a person's previous affiliations with colonial institutions. Stanley Green, a student of the period, puts it as follows:

⁷Charles A. Hale, *Mexican Liberalism in the Age of Mora, 1821-1853* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), 124-128.

Whereas the Escoseses maintained the standard of an exclusive gentleman's club, the Yorkinos were less selective. They counted more on numbers, and in practice tended to invite all comers. As a result, the York lodges became a political haven for marginal types, upwardly mobile individuals one remove from poverty.⁸

The differences in political thought and economic interests between the Liberals and Conservatives would lead to the rise and fall of not less than twenty-five governments between 1821 and 1855, the period commonly referred to as the Early Mexican Republic.⁹ As this study will demonstrate, the instability resulting from this clash seriously diminished the ability of Mexican society to respond effectively to a natural disaster such as cholera when it struck in 1833 during the administration of Gómez Farías.

But who was Valentín Gómez Farías and how did he arrive to power in the summer of 1833? The figurehead and spokesman of the radical, republican sector of the Mexican liberals, Gómez Farías was a physician and provincial deputy from Guadalajara. Regarded by many historians as a humanist ahead

⁸Green, 90.

⁹Michael C. Meyer and William L. Sherman, *The Course of Mexican History*, 4th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), Appendix, III. For the most up-to-date, detailed analysis of this period see Green, op. cit., and Barbara Tenenbaum, *The Politics of Penury: Debts and Taxes in Mexico, 1821-1856* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1986).

of his time, Gómez Farías pushed for far-reaching social reforms. Like Mora, he was committed to breaking the power of the Church in Mexico which he viewed as the chief obstacle to economic prosperity. He realized, however, that any attack on the Church and its many social functions would have to be accompanied by the creation of state-led programs in their stead. For example, recognizing the monopoly that the Church held over education in Mexico, Gómez Farías argued for an extensive program of secular education. He made similar efforts to provide for state leadership in the area of public administration, most notably in the creation of state-run hospitals--institutions formerly funded and managed by the Church.¹⁰

The educational reforms of the Gómez Farías regime were designed to release the intellectual grip that the Catholic Church held on the nation and speed the nation toward modernity and progress. Considered by many still today as the father of educational reform in Mexico, Gómez Farías set out on an ambitious path to provide educational freedom to all classes of Mexican society.¹¹ Following the trickle-down Lancasterian model of public instruction, he made it possible

¹⁰See Lillian Briseño-Senosián, et. al., *Valentín Gómez Farías y su lucha por el federalismo, 1822-1858*, (Mexico City: Instituto de Investigaciones Dr. José Luis Mora, 1991), 81-87.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 94-96.

for almost any one to open a public school and engage in instruction to teach literacy, morality, and citizenship. The biggest blow to the Church came with his reforms of the University of Mexico which he placed under the newly-founded *Dirección General de Instrucción Pública*.¹² Through this office, which was charged with overseeing all educational activities in Mexico, Gómez Farías pushed hard for introducing a science-based curriculum in place of a theological one.¹³

The Radicals' sudden rise to power in 1833 is indicative of the political division that existed in Mexican society at the time. It was facilitated by the conservative disunity that followed the ouster of the increasingly pro-clerical and arbitrary administration of the ex-royalist army officer, Anastasio Bustamante (president from 1830 to 1832).

Bustamante had assumed the Mexican presidency in the wake of a conservative backlash against the liberal reforms of Vicente Guerrero and Lorenzo Zavala, the most notorious of which was the expulsions of the Spaniards in 1829.¹⁴ It was

¹²The *Dirección General de Instrucción Pública* is the precursor to Mexico's contemporary Ministry of Education.

¹³The Radicals' educational reforms were based on the ideas of the influential Spanish liberal, Melchor Gaspar de Jovellanos.

¹⁴Many creole elites had familial and financial ties to Spanish-born residents in Mexico. Historians concur that

not long, however, before Bustamante's Spanish-like authoritarianism had created a similar schism within the ranks of the conservative military, providing for yet another opportunity for the liberals to take power.

In the vacuum and factionalism caused by the divisions within the conservative and liberal political sectors during the Bustamante Era, Gómez Farías' and his radical, liberal minority gained the Mexican presidency. They were supported by the crass blend of astuteness and opportunism displayed by the enigmatic Antonio López de Santa Anna. Santa Anna was the popular hero of the movement to oust the self-proclaimed emperor of Mexico, Agustín de Iturbide, in 1824. By 1833, he had become the principal military figure that forced Bustamante from office. Indeed, Santa Anna's charisma, military prowess and the personal devotion of his followers made him the supreme arbiter of Mexican politics during the first half of the nineteenth century.¹⁵ As one study has

efforts to expel them had more to do with pecuniary interests than any sort of nationalist agenda.

¹⁵Justo Sierra, an apologist for nineteenth-century Mexican conservatism, reserved little praise for Santa Anna's maneuverings. He writes: "General Santa Anna was a man with just enough intelligence to develop in himself to the highest degree the faculty called astuteness--an amalgam of crafty dissembling, perfidy, and perspicacity. His only religion was boundless ambition, swollen a hundred fold by his conviction that he was the Republic's founder and hence deserved the privileges of a conqueror, an ambition sustained, moreover, by figments of Catholic superstition, by his ingenuous faith in his role as an instrument of Providence. Vain as a mulatto, he was exceedingly susceptible to flattery, which

indicated, however, in 1833 the politically unpredictable Santa Anna knew that he could not control the rival factions that brought an end to the Bustamante regime and that he had only been reluctantly accepted by the majority of them. He had never associated himself directly with the policies or ideology of any one group and, after Bustamante's defeat, soon found that he lacked a firm political base.

Seeking to disassociate himself from the stigma of radicalism, Santa Anna nominated Gómez Farías as vice-president when he assumed the presidency in April of 1833. Gómez Farías' assent to the presidency occurred in May of that year when, in his typical high-handed fashion, Santa Anna tired of the duties of office and retired to his Veracruz estate on the ambiguous pretext of ill health. The enigmatic *caudillo's* (military chieftain's) decision to relinquish political power provided the Radicals with their first real bid at liberal reform.¹⁶

intoxicated him and puffed him up to the pomposity of an African sultan. Without principles of any kind and without scruples, he was immensely popular with the troops, who felt he was one of them. Ignorant of military science, he would never hesitate to take command of any campaign, even though he had no qualifications except the ability to infuse the troops with his own ardor and so great a scorn for caution that he could look danger impavdly in the face. This idol of the permanent army never showed any more capacity as a soldier than a colonel of the national guard" (Sierra, 209).

¹⁶Frank N. Samponaro, "Santa Anna and the Abortive Anti-Federalist Revolt of 1833 in Mexico," *The Americas* 40 (1983): 97-203.

Since the Radicals and Santa Anna shared little in common, theirs was primarily a marriage of convenience. In the words of one author, "both realized that they needed the other's assistance to attain their objectives of overthrowing Bustamante and gaining control at the national level."¹⁷ Apart from each other, both lacked the power to achieve their goals, but together they became for a limited time a formidable alliance.

The aggressive reformism of Gómez Farías would eventually drive Santa Anna into the opposing, conservative camp. On his part, the steadily more moderate Santa Anna was shrewd enough to see that by handing over the reins of power to his vice-president at such a delicate moment, he could avoid the stigma of radical liberalism. At one in the same time, he could conspire against his regime's enemies while disassociating himself from his appointed vice president's actions.

Gómez Farías' backers consisted of mainly urban, middle-class, progressive liberals allied to dissident military officers and landowners. Their goal was to break the oligarchic rule of the traditionally conservative provinces associated with the Bustamante era. Faced with the daunting task of introducing radical reform into what essentially

¹⁷Ibid., 96.

remained a colonial political structure, the main targets of the Radicals' project became the propertied classes, the corporate interests of the Church and army, as well as the remaining vestiges of patronage and colonial elite interests still evident in the legislative and judicial branches of public office.¹⁸

With the loyalty of Santa Anna forever in question over reforms of the military, Gómez Farías and his federalist backers obliquely attempted to bolster up the power of the civic militia, which were primarily the responsibility of state governors. Ideally they would have liked to weaken the national military by confining the bulk of its forces to the frontier regions where they would have posed a lesser threat to the national government.¹⁹ However, realizing the unlikelihood that Santa Anna would accept such a proposal, they shifted the focus of their attention to their attack on the Church and aforementioned power of the *hombres de bien* to whom they sensed the caudillo was willing to turn a blind eye.

The Radicals' assault on the Church took many forms and reflected the crystallization of Mora's liberal thought concerning the role and power of the newly-independent

¹⁸Michael P. Costeloe, *Church and State in Independent Mexico* (London: Royal Historical Society, 1978), 118.

¹⁹Samponaro, 97.

nation's most archaic institution. Even though Santa Anna's posture to such attacks remained less than readable, they still proved to be the safest avenue for aggressive reform. As one author has noted in retrospect, "Santa Anna might [have] seem[ed] conservative in his support of the army and distaste for liberalism and representative democracy, but he regarded the Church as a threat to the power of the centralized state and as a potential source of income for the government."²⁰

As could be expected, the increasing radicalism of Gómez Farías soon produced a united front amongst the elite opposition. The *hombres de bien* of Mexican society feared the leveling effect of "enfranchising the masses and allowing power to fall into the hands of the *baja democracia* (i.e., the urban, uneducated, non-elite but rapidly-growing republican sector)."²¹ In short, Gómez Farías' policies were identified more and more with the interests of the masses and not the entrenched interests of the elite classes.

Political differences aside, compounding matters in 1833 were the financial woes of the Early Republic that would become the chief concern of liberals and conservatives alike.

²⁰Donald F. Stevens, *Origins of Instability in Early Republican Mexico* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 35.

²¹Michael P. Costeloe, *The Central Republic in Mexico, 1835-1846. Hombres de Bien in the Age of Santa Anna* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 34.

Gómez Farías was far from immune to the scourge of indebted and depleted public finances. There existed a notorious scarcity of hard currency in the nation. During the war years, the destruction of the colony's lucrative mining industry, the flight of merchant capital and wide-spread looting had left the national treasury virtually bankrupt.²² The much anticipated return of foreign (primarily British) capital in significant quantities never occurred.

Between 1821 and 1833, the Mexican state struggled in often imaginative ways to raise funds. Largely due to its harsh legacy, the remnants of the colonial tax system proved difficult to retaylor and revitalize. As successive governments struggled to raise revenue within an increasingly stagnant economy, the limited funds that did become available were quickly absorbed by a mushrooming, inefficient and often corrupt bureaucracy.²³

Historians have speculated as to the true intentions behind Santa Anna's forfeiture of power to his vice president at such an auspicious yet delicate moment. As following chapters will demonstrate, the reforms and political purge

²²Margaret Chowning, "The Management of Church Wealth in Michoacán, Mexico, 1810-1856: Economic Motivations and Political Implications," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 22 (1990): 464.

²³For a detailed discussion of state finances in Mexico during the Early Republic see Tenenbaum, op. cit.

that accompanied Gómez Farías' stay in office are considered by many historians as the swan dance of a romantic, liberal idealism that characterized Mexican politics in the first decade after independence. That the bulk of radical reform in 1833 was aimed at the Church came as no surprise; the Radicals did not know exactly where Santa Anna stood in regard to infringements on the military's prerogatives and were therefore reluctant to provoke a response from that conservative sector.²⁴ When Gómez Farías' liberal Congress did make an attempt to reorganize army units and, in turn, strengthen the civic militias, Santa Anna was quick to respond to such infringements by returning to Mexico City and to his duties as president.²⁵

The ensuing political and financial instability of 1833, coupled with the ever-increasing threat of civil war, tended to distract the Mexican authorities' attention to the spread of cholera until quite late when it began to threaten the country. When the disease began exacting its heavy toll it only exacerbated political and financial tensions even more.

Politics and finances aside, in Mexico City civil and Church leaders were further beleaguered by yet other

²⁴Michael P. Costeloe, "Santa Anna and the Gómez Farías Regime in Mexico, 1833-1834," *The Americas* 31:3 (1974): 25.

²⁵Samponaro, 98.

problems. The decade or so of warfare leading to independence had ravaged the Mexican countryside sending many refugees packing to the cities for protection where they swelled the ranks of the unemployed and poor. When cholera struck Mexico City, authorities had still to catch up with the surge of immigration to the burgeoning capital. Also significant in explaining the government's lax response in taking preventive measures was the fact that the Church--the very institution that historically had aided city officials and the poorer classes during times of epidemic and famine--was the entity whose wealth and power the Gómez Farías administration was attempting to curb. By attacking the power of the Church, the radical Congress was at the same time alienating an effective ally in battling the deadly disease.

Given the instability of Mexico's political environment, cholera's arrival in the summer months of 1833 occurred at a time when the political and social institutions best equipped to handle such a crisis were at their weakest and when a system of public relief was virtually nonexistent. The state was financially broke and its infrastructure was totally unequipped to cope with the virulent nature of cholera when it hit Mexico City with a magnitude similar to the epidemics which devastated Paris in 1831 and London and New York in

1832.²⁶ The disease took by one estimate over 10,000 lives and provided many detractors of the liberal government of Gómez-Farías with a powerful weapon.²⁷ Although there was no reported rioting as a result of cholera's devastation as there had been in many European capitals, the disease's deadly progress did highlight the need for a stable political environment.

It has seldom been noted that the first cholera epidemic in Mexico coincided with the brief period of radical reform initiated by Valentín Gómez Farías. This unique convergence of events had a significant effect on Mexico's political development. As subsequent chapters will demonstrate, the epidemic not only served as a vehicle for historical change but also mirrored Mexican society during the Early Republic.

²⁶For Paris see François Delaporte, *Disease and Civilization: The Cholera in Paris, 1832* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1986). For London see N. Longmate, *King Cholera. The Biography of a Disease* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1966); and R. J. Morris, *Cholera 1832. The Social Response to An Epidemic* (New York: Holmes and Meier Publishers, 1976). For New York see Charles E. Rosenberg, *The Cholera Years: The United States in 1832, 1849, and 1866* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).

²⁷Cecil A. Hutchinson, "The Asiatic Cholera Epidemic of 1833 in Mexico," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 32:1 (1958): 163.

CHAPTER 3

CHOLERA

On 15 March, 1833, the *cabildo* (municipal council) of Mexico City ordered a comprehensive program of sanitary measures. They were designed to thwart the progress of a disease of epidemic proportions that threatened to descend on what at the time was the largest city in the western hemisphere. The disease was Asiatic cholera. Even though its pathology would not begin to be understood for nearly fifty more years, when the German bacteriologist Robert Koch isolated the cholera vibrio in 1883, its notorious history was all too familiar to other parts of the urbanized world where its drama had already played itself out.¹

Forewarned of the disease's arrival in Tampico to the north and in the southern Mexican states of Yucatán and Chiapas, the people of Mexico City were urged to take preventive action. A rigorous sanitation policy was believed to be the best defense against the threat of cholera.

¹Fielding H. Garrison, *An Introduction to the History of Medicine* (Philadelphia: n.p., 1929), 579. Also quoted in Hutchinson, 158.

Residents were ordered to clean their dwellings within and without, from top to bottom. Trash, excrement and waste water would no longer be cast into the street and allowed to infect the air, but collected each night and deposited in a prescribed manner. Public fountains, canals, sewers and drainage ditches would be cleared, repaired and maintained. Butchers were required to collect entrails daily and store them in sealed containers that could be later transported to dump sites on the city's outskirts.² Owners of *vinaterías* (wine shops) and *pulquerías* (*pulque* stands) were ordered to keep the counters and floors of their establishments clean and ensure their customers did likewise.³ The decrees continued under the threat of heavy fines, but the result of such a detailed plan of public sanitation had little effect on the course and impact of the cholera vibrio once it passed through the city's gates on or about 6 August, 1833.⁴ In one summer it took, by one estimate, over ten thousand lives and

²M. Dublán and J. M. Lozano, *Legislación mexicana*, BLC, vol. 2 (Mexico City: Imprenta del Comercio, 1876), 494-497.

³*Ibid.* *Pulque* is a popular indigenous intoxicant made from the maguey plant.

⁴Carlos María de Bustamante, "Historia del cholera Morbus en México," vol. 4, *Continuación del cuadro histórico de la revolución mexicana*, BLC (Mexico City: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 1963), 199.

presented an unprecedented slew of problems to the burgeoning capital of the newly-independent state.⁵

In light of the social, political, and economic upheaval surrounding the first cholera epidemic to strike Mexico, this and following chapters will demonstrate that most newspaper reporting and pamphlet literature concerning the event dealt not with curbing the disease's course, but rather with the real and perceived political and social conditions and behavior that added to its successes. Before any discussion of this can begin, however, a brief description of cholera becomes necessary, as does a closer look at the physical and social environment of Mexico City in 1833.

A particularly vile and heinous disease, the cholera vibrio enters the human body via the mouth and is most commonly acquired by the ingestion of food or drink contaminated by feces. Hence, cholera is essentially a problem of personal hygiene, public sanitation, or a combination of both. Historically, a contaminated water supply has been the principal source of cholera's communication. As one student of the disease points out:

Infection of water by cholera vibrios can take place through many routes. Shallow wells and other unprotected collections of water may be contaminated by direct deposit of fecal material into them by seepage; and by the washing of dejecta into them by rainwater.

⁵Hutchinson, 15.

Rivers become infested by the direct deposit of fecal matter into them by individuals; by the emptying or cleaning of latrine buckets into them; by untreated sewage; and during rains, when the feces deposited on or near water supplies are washed into them. Infected water may also contaminate vegetables and food which then serve as a further source of infection.⁶

Cholera strikes suddenly with little warning. It violently attacks the gastrointestinal tract of the body with little if no mercy. Typical cases are characterized by severe diarrhea followed by copious vomiting and great prostration. In many cases the speed with which the symptoms attain overwhelming proportions is striking. Stools are passed with such frequency that they lose all fecal character. As dehydration intensifies there is great thirst, but little supplementary fluid can be retained. In the secondary stages of the disease a victim will normally become apathetic, but "the mind will remain clear; features become gaunt, the eyes sunken, and the voice thick and feeble."⁷ In the final stage renal and circulatory failure proceeds death. The course of the disease is usually short, averaging three to five days. For some victims, however, death can take

⁶Olson Felsenfeld, *The Cholera Problem* (St. Louis: Warren H. Green, INC., 1967), 133.

⁷C. L. Russell and R. F. Loeb, eds., *A Textbook of Medicine*, 10th ed., vol. 1 (Philadelphia: W. B. Saunders Company, 1959), 222-223.

place in a matter of hours. The case fatality rate is usually forty to sixty percent of an infected population.⁸

The development of epidemic cholera is seasonal. As a rule, high temperature, high relative humidity and intermittent rains are most conducive to the vibrio's survival and proliferation. As an etiologic agent it may persist in nature in favorable circumstances for several days. In stools it dies out in one or two. For the later reason infection can be generally traced to victims living in crowded, unsanitary conditions. A victim's feces and vomit may contain cholera vibrios and therefore it is pertinent that such waste along with clothing and other contaminated articles be properly disposed.⁹

Susceptibility to cholera varies widely among individuals and survival is often predicated on the victim's previous state of health. Throughout the nineteenth century the disease reaped the majority of its victims from the swelling ranks of impoverished urban populations.

The history of cholera's spread is well known. It originated in the Ganges delta region of India. At around the turn of the eighteenth century it was transported to Europe by way of rapidly expanding maritime and overland

⁸*Encyclopedia Britannica*, 1971 ed., s.v. "Cholera."

⁹Russell, 223.

trade routes. Roaming armies also aided in its spread. Traveling at a speed of five miles a day, cholera reached Paris in 1829 and claimed 7,000 lives in eighteen days.¹⁰ Britain lost over 22,000 lives in the space of two years. Spain and Portugal suffered similar fates. In 1831 New York was hit, in November of 1832, New Orleans.¹¹

Although Mexican newspapers reported on the disease's deadly progress in Europe and the United States, many falsely believed that the vibrio was unfit for Mexico City's high altitude as is true of diseases such as malaria.¹² Only when cholera struck Guatemala City in December of 1832 and then Havana, Cuba in February, 1833 did Mexican authorities begin to sense a similar fate might loom large. Still, the scope of their concern was limited to the lower elevations of the republic and, to the dismay of only a few, most preventive measures enacted in the capital were largely ignored.

It was Lucas Alamán, while serving as foreign minister under Bustamante in 1831, who first sensed the potential threat of a cholera epidemic and worked, through his ambassadors in Europe, to gather information on its cause,

¹⁰James Burke, *The Day the Universe Changed* (London: London Writers Ltd., 1985), 195.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 222.

¹²Hutchinson, 15.

prevention and cure.¹³ Although published reports on the disease began to appear in Mexico in 1832, significant legislation aimed at curbing the chances of its proliferation did not appear in Mexico City until as late as March of 1833.

The Gulf port of Tampico in the state of Tamaulipas was the first known city in Mexico to be hit by cholera. The government paper in Mexico City reported on June 7, 1833, that its victims were carried off within six hours.¹⁴ The Yucatán port of Campeche was hit next, and Henry Perrine, an American doctor there, reported on the disease's ravages.

The mass of dead bodies were piled up like logs, and carted to the common ditch on the shore, where they were laid in rows and covered with a few shovels of sand. The skeletons of several who attempted to flee, were found divested of flesh by beasts or birds of prey. A child apparently a month old was found alive on the road side, but no traces of the mother were ever seen. Seven priests followed their flock to unconsecrated graves. Famine accompanied the plague. Provisions advanced three of four hundred percent. Crowds collected at the doors where corn was to be sold but many were carried off by the cholera before it came their turn to receive a handkerchief full.¹⁵

¹³Ibid., 3.

¹⁴Ibid., 12.

¹⁵Ibid., 14. Cited in Henry Perrine, "An Account of the Epidemic of Cholera at Campeche," *Western Journal of the Medical and Physical Sciences* 7 (1834): 321-22.

Cholera would close in on Mexico City in a three-pronged movement. From the north it moved from Tampico into the central Mexican plateau hitting San Luís de Potosí on 28 June. From the south it traveled transportation routes from Campeche to the Yucatán capital of Mérida. From the east it hit the port of Veracruz arriving there undoubtedly by ship from a stricken port of the United States or Europe. Despite news of cholera's arrival in the U.S. many residents of Mexico City felt relatively safe still clinging to the belief that cholera was not a threat to populations at higher altitudes.¹⁶

In late June, 1833, the Mexican doctor Juan Luís Chavert published in pamphlet form his, *Disertación sobre el cholera-morbus*. Basing his tract on studies undertaken in Europe, he briefly traces the disease's history and warns of its virile nature. He writes, "The cholera travels in leaps and bounds, searches out its victims, devours them, subsides temporarily only to present itself again with a renewed fury," and that "in every place cholera has found misery, filth, disorder, libertinism and a debilitated population it has delivered the highest casualties."¹⁷ He warns that

¹⁶Ibid., 15.

¹⁷Juan Luís Chavert, *Disertación sobre el cholera-morbus*, SPC (Mexico City: n.p., 1833), 2-3.

it is in populous cities where the disease finds its nourishment. For these reasons, it is at least probable that this dreadful disease will penetrate sooner or later the Mexican territory and I am afraid that for reasons I have enumerated that the capital of the republic will not be an exception.¹⁸

Chavert rests his explanation of cholera's proliferation on the existence of an unhealthy urban environment. He stresses that Mexico City can liberate itself from the threat of the disease only by practicing proper hygiene and maintaining a good public health. Echoing the laws of 15 March, he calls for the rigorous enforcement of sanitary laws: the cleaning of the city's streets and sewers, markets and slaughterhouses, and public baths. In addition, he discourages the gathering of large groups of people and stresses the importance of rapid burials should the disease strike.¹⁹

Just as Dr. Chavert had feared, the cholera vibrio did besiege Mexico City. All the physical and socio-cultural environments ideal for its spread were present there:

hot and humid weather, a water supply capable of being repeatedly and grossly contaminated by sewage, and a relatively poor population crowded together in unsanitary conditions, without the means of keeping their homes clean

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Ibid.

or of preparing and eating food in hygienic surroundings.²⁰

In 1833, Mexico City, like Paris, London and New York City before it, was filthy and without proper water or sewage disposal networks to adequately protect its populace. Travelers to the city both foreign and domestic would repeatedly comment on the filth and poverty--two strong sustainers of cholera--that one encountered when entering the city's environs. For example, in 1829 an American traveler pointedly wrote:

The city is, indeed, handsome--some of its buildings very spacious--its streets, which are regular, crossing each other at right angles, are not wide, but well paved, clean in the most frequented, but filthy beyond conception in the more remote parts--and thronged with the dirtiest, the most diseased, deformed and half-naked wretches you can imagine. Disgusting sights every moment present themselves--at the corners of every street, at the doors of the churches which you must constantly pass in your walks--and sometimes in the area of private residence you are importuned by miserable beggars. Such is the character of the street population of Mexico. So much filth, so much vice and so much ignorance are no where else.²¹

²⁰M. Durey, *The Return of the Plague: British Society and the Cholera, 1831-2* (London: Gill and MacMillan Humanities Press, 1979), 50.

²¹Edward T. Thornton, *Mexico, 1825-1828*, edited by C. Harvey Gardiner (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1959), 53.

The social conditions that nurtured cholera's spread were rampant in Mexico City in 1833. With a population of approximately 150,000 it was the largest urban area in the Western Hemisphere.²² It promised to remain that way due to the attraction it offered as a prosperous market in a country beset by economic hardship. A discussion of the epidemic thus becomes a discussion of the living and sanitation conditions of Mexico City in 1833.

The summer months in Mexico City during which the cholera struck are hot, humid and produce an abundance of rainfall that sustains an uncomfortable dampness--a dampness in which the cholera vibrio thrives. Since early colonial times, summer showers were notorious for inundating the city to the extent that suburbs in the southern and eastern portions of the city became passable only by canoe. Such flooding produced serious recurring problems. Even in the city's center, in the well-drained Plaza de la Constitución

²²Population estimates for Mexico City during the Early Republic vary widely. Shaw estimates a population of 120,000-150,000, Kandell nearly 200,000. A recent study suggests that the population did not exceed 170,000 at mid-century while estimates for the nation are between six and seven million inhabitants. See R. R. Olivera and L. Crété, *Life in Mexico under Santa Anna, 1822-1855* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), 19; 45. For further discussion on urban immigration at the time see R. E. Boyer, "Las ciudades mexicanas: perspectivas de estudio en el siglo XIX," *Historia Mexicana* 22:2 (1972): 142-159.

(or *Zócalo*), water levels from heavy rains sometimes reached knee level.²³

The fact that Mexico City was built upon a drained lake basin meant that periodic heavy rains often left stagnant lakes and marshes in the lower elevations of the city. Many of these water-choked points served as unregulated dump sites for the city's waste.²⁴ During downpours these sites often overflowed and carried off previously deposited refuse (including human waste) to points throughout the city.

Because contaminated water is more often than not the carrier of the cholera morbus vibrio, a closer look at Mexico City's water supply is necessary. The problem of maintaining an adequate water supply has plagued Mexico City since pre-Columbian times.²⁵ The basin in which the city sits yields a brackish water high in nitrates.²⁶ Such water is the most favorable for the survival of the cholera vibrios.

The water delivery system of Mexico City of 1833 consisted of a network of aqueducts, distribution tanks

²³Frederick J. Shaw, Jr., *Poverty and Politics in Mexico City, 1824-1854* (Unpublished Ph.D.. Dissertation, University of Florida, 1975), 3.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 2-3.

²⁵S. Lombardo de Ruiz, "El desarrollo urbano de México-Tenochtitlán," *Historia Mexicana* 22:2 (1972): 130-131.

²⁶Jonathan Kandell, *La Capital: The Biography of Mexico City* (New York: Random House, 1988), 30.

(atarjea, or taujía), and underground conduits (caños, or cañería).²⁷ The few fresh water wells that once supplied the Aztec city of Tenochtitlán were quickly depleted during the colonial period and required the construction of two massive aqueducts in the early seventeenth century.²⁸ These two great projects of colonial public works were linked to the mountain springs of Santa Fé and Chapultepec west of the city. Combined, the aqueducts supplied a network of 28 public and 505 private fountains.²⁹

Under Spanish colonial administration the cabildo was responsible for the development, maintenance and regulation of the city's water supply.³⁰ However, major construction projects were more often than not contracted out to private entrepreneurs in exchange for the right to market the water once lines were laid. As such, residential running water was a luxury to be purchased and, overtime, disparities in access

²⁷Stephen Weber, "Water and Society in Santiago de Guatemala, 1555-1773," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 70 (1990): 61.

²⁸Thornton, 64. Also see Joel R. Poinsett, *Notes on Mexico Made in 1822* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Inc., Publishers, 1969), 50-51; and Manuel Romero de Terreros, *Los Acueductos de México en la Historia y en el Arte* (Editorial Jus, 1949).

²⁹Shaw, 6.

³⁰Fredrick B. Pike, "Public Work and Social Welfare in Colonial Spanish America," *The Americas* 13 (1957): 369.

to municipally supplied water became glaringly evident. As one historian has discovered in a recent study of the water supply system in the colonial capital of the Guatemalan captaincy, "more than 62 percent of the [city's] water supply was allotted to fewer than two hundred private residences whose inhabitants probably represented less than 4 percent of the city's population."³¹

In Mexico City most water flowing from public works was directed toward the city center and appropriated by the elite neighborhoods. Poorer sectors of society were forced to rely on shallow wells or the public fountains in the city's main plazas for their potable water supply. Those who could afford it relied on *aguadores* (water bearers), "who were inclined to charge high fees during periods of scarcity."³² The *aguadores* were indispensable figures of the daily life and street culture of the city.³³

³¹Weber, 74.

³²Gabriel Haslip Vieira, "The Underclass," in *Cities and Society in Colonial Latin America*, edited by Louis S. Hoberman and Susan M. Socolow (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1986), 297.

³³Shaw, 6. One traveler during the time cynically noted that the *aguadores* "seem to have a great aversion to the article in which they deal, for at an early hour they may be seen in a *pulquefied* state, stretched on the bare ground in the fullness of enjoyment." See W. Bullock, *Six Months' Residence and Travels in Mexico* [1824] (Reprint; Port Washington: Kennikat Press, 1971), 213.

Laboring fifteen hours a day, the aguador carried water to neighborhoods far removed from the fountains. A huge earthenware jug pressed against his back and a smaller one hung from his forehead by a tumpline. He was renowned as 'the purveyor of local gossip and the deliverer of love letters and walking domestic employment agency.' He was also called upon to dispose of unwanted pets, which he drowned in the public fountains.³⁴

As was true in many of the cosmopolitan areas of the West, it was mostly the poor who drank from the public wells. "Those who could afford the expense had their water supplied in hogsheads from the 'pure' springs of the countryside."³⁵ Next came those who could afford to pay an aguador (who, in the time of cholera, was also the purveyor of death).

If the cholera vibrio infiltrated Mexico City's water supply it was probably because the city's inhabitants and authorities did little to protect the quality of their water. As Shaw has observed in his excellent study of Mexico City during the Early Republic, almost all accounts of the time suggest that

The people dangerously polluted their own water supply. Tanners, wax chandlers, starch makers, and pork butchers dumped wastes into the aqueducts and the portion of the canal that served as the water supply for the *barrios* of San Gerónimo and Candelaria. The canal was also the receptacle for the filth that drained from nearby dunghills. Private

³⁴Kandell, 295.

³⁵Weber, 72.

individuals dumped household trash and fecal materials into the aqueducts, fountains, and canals in which they also bathed.³⁶

Although the English doctor John Snow's famous observation that cholera's spread could be attributed to a contaminated water supply would not be made until 1854, there was limited recognition that water quality was somehow related to the proliferation of cholera. However, only when the threat of cholera loomed large did the cabildo make a concerted effort to protect the city's water supply. On March 15, the washing of carts, horses, pots and pans, and clothes, and the drowning of animals in public fountains and canals was expressly prohibited. On March 20, the cabildo even ordered the aguadores of the city to clean the fountains they serviced the first and fifteenth day of each month.³⁷

The medical community of Mexico City had been monitoring reports of cholera's progress from as far away as Europe, and treatises on cholera and its prevention by doctors in Paris and London were translated, enhanced upon and reproduced in newspaper and pamphlet form for distribution in the Mexican capital as early as the end of 1832. Concerning water quality one such treatise warned that it "should be clear and preferably filtered. When taken straight, it is best to

³⁶Shaw, 140.

³⁷Dublán, 498.

clarify it with a little brandy or vinegar (two teaspoons of brandy or one of vinegar for every four quarts of water)."³⁸

Water quality was ultimately linked to problems of sanitation and waste disposal in Mexico City. During the first half of the nineteenth century, the city's sewage system consisted primarily of a network of open drainage ditches running down the center of the city's paved and, more often, unpaved streets. Into these ditches were dumped everything imaginable: stale bath water, human and animal excrement, spoiled fruits and vegetables, meat by-products and entrails and even the carcasses of dead animals, some of which had been recently drowned in the public fountain. These open sewers also served as the public rest room for much of the poorer population and were the welcome playgrounds for the many pigs that "roamed the streets, spreading offal [and eventually cholera] throughout entire neighborhoods."³⁹

As numerous newspaper accounts relate, the sight and stench of garbage piles and the occasional stoppages and overflows of open sewer lines were notorious and continually presented problems to civil authorities. Obstructions along

³⁸Consejo de sanidad, *Precauciones contra el cholera-morbus y instrucción sobre el uso del cloruro de oxido de sodio*, SPC (Mexico City: n.p., 1833), 7.

³⁹Shaw, 158.

any point in a sewage ditch would result in the formation of *muladores* (huge piles) that quickly assumed the form of small mountains and "seriously impeded the flow of traffic" in the city's streets.⁴⁰ During the rainy season these same ditches easily overflowed and deposited their contents in the ground floors of many dwellings and establishments, or even worse infiltrated the city's subterranean water supply. The Mexico City medical community consistently argued that regulation concerning the flow of sewage and the proper disposal of trash was of the utmost importance in controlling cholera's tide. It was correctly postulated that such conditions only fostered cholera's hospitable stay in the Mexican capital.

The Mexican medical community was correct in following the lead of their contemporaries in Europe and the United States that cholera was a problem of sanitation. Most medical literature published at the time stressed the importance of a healthy, clean environment in curbing the disease. One such pamphlet entitled, *Métodos Observativo y Curativo de la cholera-morbus, practicado en París en la época de la invasión*, urged citizens to keep a clean and tidy home. "All water used in domestic tasks should be immediately disposed." "Drainage pipes and sewers should be flushed with water." "Windows should be cleaned each morning

⁴⁰Ibid.

to allow the action of sunlight necessary for man's health."⁴¹

The cabildo of Mexico City responded equally with regulations of every shape and form to curb violations of public hygiene. At the same time it unknowingly laid the groundwork for future programs of public health. A government decree on 14 May warned that only through the rigorous maintenance of sanitation laws would the nation be spared from the fatal disease.⁴² Gutters were ordered repaired and common sewers unclogged. Citizens would dispose of all household wastes in a prescribed manner being careful not to let harmful liquids spill or create puddles. Any one caught relieving themselves in the street would be levied a heavy fine--a fine that would be extended to the parents, teachers, acquaintances and schools of children doing likewise. The littering of the street by any person, regardless of class, sex or condition from which they hailed would be strictly prohibited. Dead animals would be disposed of immediately. Pigs would not be allowed to roam in the streets. Latrines would be cleaned only during the evening hours between 10 P.M. and 6 A.M. (to reduce the emission of

⁴¹Alphonso Dumartray, *Métodos Observativo y Curativo de la cholera-morbus, practicado en París en la época de la invasión*, SPC (Mexico City: n.p., 1833), 5-7.

⁴²Dublán, 517.

noxious fumes to limited periods). Any excrement would be transported in barrels taking care that it did not spill in the process.⁴³

The government's regulations and the advice of the medical community falsely operated on the premise that cholera was not contagious. Many believed rather that the disease was caused by the putrid air or *miasma* that was associated with unsanitary conditions such as the ones described above.

One pamphlet distributed by the *Junta de Sanidad* (Board of Health) advised, "It has been observed that the purer the air in which you surround yourself, the least chance you have of acquiring the cholera."⁴⁴ It went on to instruct that an effective weapon against the scourge was to place a bucket with a solution of water and chloride in one's bedroom at night to purify the air. The same solution, the author added, could be used to disinfect one's household, clean one's clothes, as well as bathe a victim of cholera. The burning of pine or other resinous woods, it recommended, would also aid in purifying the air.⁴⁵ All these methods, it

⁴³Ibid., 496-497.

⁴⁴Consejo de sanidad, 6-8.

⁴⁵Ibid.

was claimed, had been proven to work in previous epidemics in Europe and the United States.

In 1833 there was no concept of invisible microbes or germs. It was still widely believed that winds and not men were the conveyors of disease.⁴⁶ In addition, aesthetic considerations rather than a concern for public health motivated efforts to keep aqueduct currents flowing. For example, when in 1832 the inhabitants of a block in the city center complained that "poisonous gases reeking from a stopped-up aqueduct endangered their health, an inspector from the *Junta de Sanidad* confirmed the condition but declared that it was not dangerous because the residents appeared to be generally healthy."⁴⁷

The cabildo's efforts did not end at the drainage ditch. Legislation was also extended to the city's markets, places that according to most accounts abounded in sanitary violations. For example, Kandell gives the following account of Mexico City's principal market:

The main vegetable and meat market was located off the southeast corner of the [Plaza del] Zócalo in the Plaza del Volador, where the Inquisition had publicly executed its victims two centuries before. The alleys of the Volador market were slippery from animal entrails, rotten fruit, vegetable remains, shattered eggs,

⁴⁶John S. Chambers, *The Conquest of Cholera* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1938), 335.

⁴⁷Shaw, 141.

and a thick layer of mud that covered the cobblestones. Strings of sausages danced above the greasy counters. Flies danced around mounds of butter, pork rinds, tripe, and limp fish. Shoppers were buffeted, elbowed, and shoved as they squeezed from one stall to another. The putrid, rancid smells were suffocating, and the harangue of the vendors was ear-splitting. But because of its cheap prices, the Volador market was favored by every class.⁴⁸

During the time of cholera, a visit to the city's market could prove deadly as sanitary food-handling procedures were unknown. As Shaw points out:

The sale of contaminated food was common. Dead fish from the aqueducts or the beaches of Veracruz found their way to the stalls of the central market place. Tanners sold the spoiled flesh of pigs and goats or the more palatable meat of dogs fattened on maize. Entrails taken from the cadavers of scavenger dogs found in the streets appeared in the shops as beef or pork tripe. Edibles were further debased by a customary washing in the aqueducts or fountains.

Even the generally good-natured and optimistic Guillermo Prieto, the novelist of the Early Republic, had a few harsh words to describe conditions in the city's market. In his *Memorias* he writes that commerce was carried on

in mud between fruit peels, feathers, the remains of fowl, and all species of offal. The filth and the pestilence were most notable among the fruit, tamales of fish, frogs, salamanders, etc., and preserved fruit, fat

⁴⁸Kandell, 295-296.

tripe, sweetbreads, meat pies, and other indecent and half-cooked meats.⁴⁹

In light of such lurid conditions, almost all pamphlet literature at the time stressed the obvious necessity of washing food before consumption. There was equal warning of the danger of eating unripe or spoiled fruits and vegetables, meats and dairy products, or any other substances known to cause stomach disorders. Most stressed the importance of a lean, healthy diet.

When cholera reigns the manner in which you diet is of the utmost importance. Boiled or roasted meats well cooked with little fat, fresh fish of easy digestion, eggs, and light well-baked bread should comprise basic nourishment. Salted meat and fish are not agreeable; pork should be taken the least possible, and one should abstain entirely from all fatty doughs and pastas.⁵⁰

The medical community did not limit itself to subjects of hygiene and a nourishing diet, but went on to include discussion concerning the merits of a moderate, moral and healthy lifestyle, and the need to avoid excesses. "It is wise to return home early at the end of the day," one author wrote. "Avoid spending your evenings at *tertúlias*, *cafés*, taverns, etc., particularly on cold and humid nights. Stay

⁴⁹Guillermo Prieto, *Memorias de mis tiempos* (Puebla, Mexico: Editorial José M. Cajica Jr., S. A., 1970), 306. Also cited in Shaw, 143.

⁵⁰Dumartray, 7-8.

busy, lead an active life, but avoid those activities that lead to fatigue."⁵¹ Another authority warned that "sobriety is of the greatest necessity. There have been a great many cases whereby cholera has declared itself after the excesses of the table, and it is probable that drunkards are particularly exposed to this disease."⁵²

The condition of Mexico City's water supply system, sewage system and markets as described by Prieto and others is indicative of the general deterioration of colonial institutions and society after independence. During the colonial period the Spanish had made considerable progress in dealing with problems of public sanitation and food supply and regulation. As one study has found relating to the slaughter and sale of meat:

this basic industry received careful and intelligent attention. The cabildo had immediate jurisdiction over the meat business. The notary of the cabildo was required to make regular reports to the viceroy of conditions in meat markets; and the town councilmen would take no action contrary to the orders of the viceroy. In the regulation of this business consideration was given to the preservation of the supply, the sanitary handling of the product, and its fair distribution. Every

⁵¹Ibid., 6.

⁵²Ibid., 7.

precaution was taken to ensure cleanliness, fair weight, and equitable price.⁵³

Problems of public sanitation were equally addressed by colonial officials. Efforts can be traced to the administration of the first viceroy of Mexico, Antonio de Mendoza. As early as 1543 legislation was enacted in Mexico City concerning the stench and filth emanating from the city's markets and slaughter houses and the danger they posed to the public's health. There was also early recognition of the threat of such conditions to the city's water supply. Heavy fines and sentences were imposed on those who aided in its adulteration.⁵⁴

With almost three hundred years of ordinances to reference, government efforts in 1833 at controlling sanitation in the markets were directed at the principal violators--the city's vendors. Legislation of 15 March ordered that "merchants of fruit, vegetables, coal and those who deal with pottery and glass containers, that hold grasses and straw for packing, would be obligated to collect any waste and dispose of it outside the city."⁵⁵ In addition,

⁵³William H. Dusenberry, "The Regulation of Meat Supply in Sixteenth-Century Mexico City," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 28 (1949): 38-52.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, 48.

⁵⁵Dublán, 496.

bakers and other merchants were responsible to clean up any spilt flour, wood, coal, seeds or grain the moment such spills occurred. The requirements extended to other establishments that tended in food for consumption. Restaurants, taverns and inns, and all other similar dwellings were required to dispose of food wastes properly and remove them from their premises daily.⁵⁶

In his study of the epidemic's progress, historian Cecil A. Hutchinson has found that most civic legislation enacted in Mexico City often went unheeded and produced great alarm on the part of the medical community, who only fought harder to push their programs through. There is little indication that any of the cabildo's decrees impressed much action upon the populace of the capital. Landlords, merchants and shopkeepers for the most part were reluctant to pursue any renovations or improvements to their establishments. Many equated the government's decrees and fines directed at sanitation as yet another oppressive revenue-raising scheme. A similar response was evoked by the poorer ignorant classes that saw little point in performing responsible actions for what was commonly seen as an equally irresponsible government.⁵⁷ The fact is that most recommendations put

⁵⁶Ibid.

⁵⁷Hutchinson, 142.

forth in pamphlet literature were out of reach of many of the poorer residents of the capital, primarily because the vast majority of Mexico City's poor were illiterate.

Part of the reason for the government's lax response and poor preparation in combating cholera can be attributed to the fact that the Catholic Church and Mexico City cabildo, traditional players in urban and civil administration during the colonial period, saw their coffers and their respective administrative authority dwindle with independence. The crisis in arrears was largely due to the fact that the much despised, but nonetheless generative, revenue systems of both the Church and the former colonial municipal government had become the chief targets of successive governments faced with financing the bureaucratic apparatus of the newly-independent state.

Equally telling in evaluating the government's inability to stem the tide of cholera is that the politics of the age effectively pitted two former allies of public works and social welfare against each other. Throughout the colonial period municipal governments and the Catholic Church had acted in unison in regard to the construction and administration of such works as public fountains, hospitals, and poor houses. As one study has noted on the colonial period, "one of the most clear-cut examples of cabildo-Church

cooperation can be found in local provisions for the protection of public health."⁵⁸

In the face of cholera the slow response of the Mexico City government could also largely be attributed to the competition of funds between the federal government and the state of Mexico. In 1824 the national congress transferred control of Mexico City to the federal government and created the Federal District, which continues to this day. Conceded in this act were such lucrative revenue sources as customs duties, state levies, sales and pulque taxes, tithes, and salaries of vacant ecclesiastical offices. The city and state also lost its right to administer the estates of properties of various religious orders that were confiscated during Gómez Farías' tenure in office.⁵⁹ As a result Mexico City saw much of its potential revenue go into federal coffers, rather than those of the state of Mexico that was previously responsible for the city's administration.

With the former wealth of Mexico City being drained into the debt-ridden accounts of the federal government, a crisis in arrears quickly resulted. The revenue generated by the state of Mexico and Mexico City was over one-third of the

⁵⁸Pike, 362-63.

⁵⁹Charles W. Macune, "The Impact of Federalism on Mexican Church-State Relations, 1824-1835: The Case of the State of Mexico," *The Americas* 40 (1984): 511-12.

revenue of the nation as a whole.⁶⁰ Another way of looking at this was that Mexico City's wealth, under federalism, was forced to carry the expenses and debts of over one third of the national territory. Such an equation drastically affected the cabildo's ability to raise funds to sanitize the city and combat cholera.

Both the cabildo and the central government, which shared views of the city's often flooded central plaza, were prostrated by cholera when it struck with a vengeance during the months of August and September 1833. When the government's efforts at sanitation failed, and cholera reigned in full force, many residents of the capital flooded the city's churches asking God to temper His judgment. As Chapter 5 will demonstrate, the much beleaguered Church capitalized on such fears and redirected them in many instances toward the liberal, anti-clerical policies of the national government.

⁶⁰Ibid., 509.

CHAPTER 4

THE LEPEROS

The fact that the majority of cholera's victims came from Mexico City's impoverished underclass suggests that a closer look at this segment of the population would enhance the discussion of the epidemic's success. For purposes of this study the term *léperos* (i.e., underclass) will be used to describe the "polyglot mass of artisans, unskilled laborers, and their families, earning a subsistence income or less" that comprised the city's poor at the time. "Ill-clothed, ill-housed, and ill-fed," they numbered approximately 80 percent of the city's population.¹ Numerous references to them are made throughout the period by travelers, diplomats, politicians and polemicists--foreign and Mexican. The Prussian naturalist Alexander Von Humboldt labeled them "the dregs of society."² Their indigenous roots and purported lack of education and morality were often pointed to as the chief cause of their condition.

¹Shaw, iv; xvi-xvii.

²Alexander Von Humboldt, *Political Essay on the Kingdom of New Spain*, vol. I (London: Penguin Books, 1973), 235.

The léperos often bore the brunt of blame for many of Mexico City's ills of which cholera was no exception. Their unemployed state was reputedly the result of their habitual laziness and chronic drunkenness.³ Their wanton disregard of clothing or cleanliness and a vice-ridden lifestyle was, for many, chief indicators of their susceptibility to cholera. When the disease hit their ranks the hardest in 1833, the cabildo and the medical profession looked to their condition for answers to prevention.⁴

Residential segregation separated the rich from the poor in Mexico City and would decisively dictate where cholera would strike most effectively. The majority of cholera's victims lived in densely populated neighborhoods in the city's wetter, lower regions. The wealthy occupied the drier, more convenient and healthier central locations. As Shaw points out:

The boundaries that separated the Spanish Traza [the old Spanish quarter] from the Indian *barrio* left an indelible mark upon the social distribution of the population. The boundaries delineated two cities. One was worthy of being counted among the most beautiful in the New World. The other city of the *barrios* was a city 'of mud, of clogged, stinking sewers, of unlit streets' in which

³Michael C. Scardaville, "Alcohol Abuse and Tavern Reform in Late Colonial Mexico City," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 60 (1980): 656-57.

⁴Hutchinson, 154.

'human misery was revealed to the most cynical publicity.'⁵

A central factor attributing cholera's proliferation among Mexico City's poor was that most lacked adequate shelter and instead lived in crowded, unsanitary conditions. This was chiefly the result of increased migration into the capital in the aftermath of independence. The need to accommodate a burgeoning population opted many property owners to "'reduce the houses in the center of town to small rooms, hidden breeding grounds where an innumerable amount of people live at their pleasure, without risk of being visited by any justice except when there is a murder, robbery, or such like event.'⁶

The typical dwelling of the lépero was a one room tenement-like quarter shared between nine and eighteen persons or more.⁷ Many lived in unventilated chambers, some in dank cellars. Because cholera transfers most easily from

⁵Ibid., 148. Shaw substantiates this fact noting that, "The mean rent of the Traza habitations was \$16; that of the barrios was \$4." In addition, "The Traza included 81 percent of the houses employing servants and 83 percent of the capital's foreign residents" (Shaw, 49).

⁶C. M. Bustamante, *México por dentro y fuera bajo el goberno de los virreyes, o sea Enfermedades políticas que padece la capital de la Nueva España* (Mexico: n.p., 1833), cited in Torcuato S. di Tella, "The Dangerous Classes in Early Nineteenth Century Mexico," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 5:1 (1973): 95. Di Tella states that Mexico City "grew in size completely out of proportion to its economic role" (Ibid.).

⁷Shaw, 49.

person to person in close proximity, such tenements exponentially multiplied one's chances of contracting not only cholera but a wide array of infectious diseases. In his study of their quarters, Shaw describes the following:

The interior of the houses were filthy. Trash enclosed the fountain, cluttered the stairways, and covered the floor of lower rooms whose 'ant-like inhabitants lacked the slightest trace of cleanliness.' Constant dampness created its own problems and intensified those associated with the filth. The unpaved ground-floor rooms were below street level. Throughout the year, ground water seeping into the rooms created an atmosphere of 'pure humidity.' During the rainy season, water pouring in from the unpaved streets or seeping up slowly through the unpaved floor buried the rooms in a foul concoction of mud, garbage and human feces.⁸

When cholera struck, its effect on the poor living in such conditions was immediate. Following reports of the disease's progress in Europe, it was recognized by municipal officials that residence in filthy, dark, and poorly ventilated ground-floor rooms was a main factor in one's vulnerability to cholera. They expressed their concerns urging the following:

Avoid crowded, stuffy rooms. Dwellings should be aired out every morning and urine and fecal matter should be disposed of immediately. Laundry should not be dried out indoors and humid conditions should be avoided at all times. Windows should be cleaned weekly to allow the proliferation of light necessary for good health. Animal stalls should be cleaned frequently and streets should be kept free of offal. Many people especially the poor have the bad habit of going about barefooted on

⁸Shaw, 149-151.

cold floors. It cannot be reiterated enough how dangerous this is when cholera reigns.⁹

On 15 May the cabildo echoed the concerns of the medical authorities and ordered landlords of tenement-like dwellings to raise the bottom floors of their homes to street level and to remove all garbage and stagnant water on their premises.¹⁰

Within Mexico City most legislation enacted during the spring of 1833 was directed at efforts of reducing the deadly miasmas and filth that was generally thought to be the leading cause of cholera.¹¹ Actions were taken to clean up the city's streets, plazas, markets and aqueducts, all of which were notorious for their excessive stench and unsanitary condition.¹² Further regulation was placed on the public's activities in such places as the city's *pulquerías*. Medical knowledge current at the time stressed that the immoral excesses associated with alcohol could be directly attributed to one's susceptibility to cholera.¹³ The increasing number of pamphlets that rapidly emerged continually admonished the dangers of such crowded, dank and

⁹Dumatray, 6.

¹⁰Dublán, 518.

¹¹James S. Chambers, *The Conquest of Cholera* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1938), 335.

¹²See Jonathan Kandell, *La Capital: The Biography of Mexico City* (New York: Random House, 1988), 295-296; and Shaw, 140-141.

¹³See Dublán, 494-497; and Juan Luis Chavert, *Disertación sobre el cholera-morbus* (Mexico City: 1833), 2-3.

filthy establishments and habitats. The interior conditions of churches at the time were not excluded from their consideration, a fact that incensed the religious community.¹⁴

Most pamphlets commissioned by the government and directed at the poorer classes addressed the wide spread problem of drunkenness and vice among the *léperos* and its potential correlation with cholera. In a concerted campaign, government-commissioned pamphleteers specifically warned of the hazards of consuming such popular alcoholic drinks as *pulque*, *chinguirito* (a type of rum), *aguardiente*, *chicha* (a type of pineapple brandy), or beers and wines of lesser quality, all of which had been proven to provoke the disease. One commentator even urged that "sensual pleasures and abuses of such specie should be avoided scrupulously."¹⁵ Gradually, efforts to prevent cholera became one and the same with liberalism's effort to reform the public body.

The Mexican authorities' emphasis on sobriety and the merits of a moderate lifestyle in confronting the threat of cholera had its roots in the numerous morality campaigns enacted under late-colonial Bourbon rule. As a recent study has noted, "Bourbon bureaucracy engineered unprecedented

¹⁴Consejo de sanidad, 6-8.

¹⁵G. Pedro de Villar, *Consejos al Pueblo Mexicano sobre los medios mas sencillos y fáciles de precaver y curar el cholera-morbus epidémico, puesto del modo más acomodado a sus usos y costumbres, de orden del supremo gobierno*, SPC (Mexico City: n.p., 1833), 7.

campaigns to extirpate the vices of the people and to inculcate in them the virtues of hard work, sobriety, and proper public propriety."¹⁶ At its root, Bourbon philosophy--the precursor to moderate liberal philosophy in post-independence Mexico--sought to revitalize the colonial economy by redefining the relationship between the individual and the state.

In large urban centers such as Mexico City, issues of social control gained new importance. Under the Hapsburgs, the public body was largely considered the domain of the Church. The Bourbon state, however, sought to erase old social loyalties and replace them with its new social ordering concept of uniform public behavior regardless of social position. Although the Liberals recognized the inherent dichotomy between a European brand of liberalism and Mexico's largely non-European masses, they still clung to the belief that the individual was rational and productive and capable of bettering his own condition.

Efforts to revitalize the civic morality of the Mexico City underclass were an extension of the Radicals' goal of reforming the masses through education. Throughout the administration of Gómez Farías, the medium of newspapers and pamphlets were put to good use in an effort to educate Mexico City's poor. The liberal rationale of the Radical's vision

¹⁶Pamela Voekel, "Peeing on the Palace: Bodily Resistance to Bourbon Reforms in Mexico City," *Journal of Historical Sociology* 5 (1992): 183.

of such a program appeared in the pro-government paper *El Demócrata* on August 20, 1833.

Mexicans will be less susceptible to the physical and moral diseases when they become more civilized: the purity of custom and good habits are the best preservatives to this end. Let us provide better education to our children, let us teach them to be more polished and well-dressed. Accustom them to search for the natural causes of their condition and in them they will find both the beginning of the bad, as well as the means to guard against it.¹⁷

Apart from education, hard times and a burgeoning lower-class population dictated to authorities of Mexico City that strict measures needed to be taken to curb the volatile atmosphere that an increasingly deprived and drunken populace posed. The real or perceived drunken state of the urban poor threatened stability and became a virtual powder keg during times of economic depression and ever-present famine. The specter of cholera could prove equally explosive. It was known in Mexico that the disease's wake in Europe had led to incidents of rioting.¹⁸

After independence, legislation addressing the issue of public morality mirrored legislation put forth during the Bourbon era. Most immediately, the threat of urban

¹⁷*El Demócrata*, 20 August 1833, 4.

¹⁸The riot of 1692 in Mexico City had provided valuable lessons concerning the elite's perception that the disturbances had originated in the capital's *pulquerías*, "those dens of iniquity." See R. Douglas Cope, *The Limits of Racial Domination: Plebian Society in Colonial Mexico City* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994), 127.

disturbances and the specter of rioting prompted restrictions on the sale and consumption of *pulque*, an indigenous intoxicant popular among the lower class. Most legislation was directed at the regulation of *pulquerías*. For example, on 28 January, 1829, the central government ordered in the interest of public safety and health that *pulquerías* and other related establishments could no longer remain open past nine o'clock in the evening. In addition, on Sundays and religious holidays they would not be allowed open until one o'clock in the afternoon. The intent of the legislation was to curb the excesses of drunkenness and licentiousness associated with such locales on the part of the predominately indigenous and mestizo populace.

Later decrees similar to that of 1829 openly admitted the failure of previous legislation. On 22 March, 1831, the appearance of an increasing number of street stalls and vendors selling *pulque* coupled with increasing outbreaks of civil unrest prompted the government to announce that the sale of *pulque* would be limited to licensed establishments only. The stipulations involved were extended to billiard halls, places that experience had proven served as points of reunion for vagabonds, criminals and other types of "treacherous classes."¹⁹

Although a rigorous sanitation policy and morality campaign was widely believed to be the best defense against

¹⁹Dublán, 91; 316-317.

the threat of cholera there was little effort to follow up any legislation with enforcement. Embroiled in the first stirrings of a civil war that would eventually lead to the loss of Texas, the federalist government of the short-lived Santa Anna-Gómez Farías alliance failed to respond adequately to the early warning signs of the disease's impending designs on the capital. Cholera reached Mexico City in the early part of August, 1833. Its first victim was a woman resident of the Calle de Santa Teresa.

Stephen F. Austin, who had been lobbying the cause of Texas in the Mexican congress and who had become stricken with the disease himself, made the following observation concerning the early effects of the disease in the Mexican capital:

What are considered promontory symptoms of cholera gave me warning since Monday of last week. I was then much engaged in trying to get the 11 article [sic] of the law of 6 April before congress in a favorable shape and it was to have been sent in on Wednesday, but the cholera prevented a meeting and has done so ever since that day I fatigued myself much indeed. This brought my symptoms to a crisis, for I was taken about 3 o'clock P.M. with excessive purging of a white mucus character, great pain in bowels, cold feet, legs, hands, etc., pains over the body--no cramps--moderate vomiting--this was evidently the first stage of this disease and would probably have passed into the collapse in a short time. It was at this moment I closed a few lines to you by the last mail and applied cholera remedy--in about three-quarters of an hour I was relieved by a fine perspiration which I think saved my life, for others have died in less than one hour whose symptoms were similar to mine. This disease prostrates the strength to a most astonishing degree. I find that I sensibly

feel the effects of the bilious attacks I have had in Texas and the quantity of calcareo etc. I had to take--my stomach is so debilitated that I have to diet with great caution to avoid a relapse.²⁰

Austin would put cholera's death toll in Mexico City at about 18,000. He further estimated there were 43,000 afflicted with the disease at one time and later wrote, "I have never witnessed such a horrible scene of distress and death."²¹

On 9 August, 1833, the official government newspaper *El Telégrafo* printed official decrees on the government's strategy to curb cholera's proliferation amongst the lower classes. Striking an authoritative note, the government warned of heavy fines for any one violating the strict sanitation laws issued to date. In cooperation with the *ayuntamiento* (city hall) of Mexico City, a government appointed *Junta de Sanidad* (Health Board) was organized to monitor the disease's toll and administer public aid. In each *manzana* (city block) of the capital, a commission was formed to administer medicines and see to the rapid and efficient burial of victims. In addition, the commissions were ordered to pay strict attention to the operations of the

²⁰Cited in J. Villasana Haggard, "Epidemic Cholera in Texas, 1833-34," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 40 (1937): 222.

²¹*Ibid.*, 223.

city's vinaterías and pulquerías, ensuring that they remained closed daily after six o'clock in the afternoon.²²

Unique to this lengthy *bando* (posting) of 9 August was that there was no mention of the Church's role in aiding civil authorities with the exception of the prohibition enacted against the ringing of Church bells. Based on a *priori* knowledge, it was greatly feared by the government that the ceremonious striking of bells during services and wakes (*agonías*) could incite the masses to hysteria and revolt.²³

As the next chapter will show, on the political front many used the eventual successes of cholera to criticize the shortfalls of the social reforms of the Gómez-Farías administration. The living conditions and questioned lifestyles of the laboring poor and vagrant classes rapidly entered into political discourse of the time. The conservative elite believed that the chronic lack of virtue and morality of the popular classes was the cause not the result of their filthy surroundings. Indeed for conservative, centralist detractors such as Carlos María Bustamante, the epidemic's sole chronicler, cholera spelled out clearly the detrimental effects that the anticlerical policies pursued at the time had on the one institution best equipped to combat the disease and rescue the poor from their

²²*El Telégrafo*, 9 August 1833, 1-2.

²³*Ibid.*

immoral, impoverished condition.²⁴ Other more enlightened individuals, the medical community in particular (to which Gómez Farías belonged), saw cholera as more the product of the legacy and inadequacies of Spanish colonial society. It was the later's concern and action that led to initial movements toward a state-led program of sanitation and public health in the capital during the first half of the nineteenth century.

²⁴Bustamante, *"Historia del cholera Morbus in México,"* BLC (Mexico City: n.p., 1835).

CHAPTER 5

REACTION

Although Mexico achieved its independence from Spain in 1821, the immediate impact it had on the social structure of the once-great and once very-lucrative colony was minimal. In the immediate aftermath of severing ties with the metropolitan country, threads of continuity still tied Mexico to its colonial past. Attempts to import new ideas into the nation were continually met by efforts of the conservative elite to maintain the status quo of the former colonial order. Most noticeably, the Catholic Church continued to hold considerable influence (spiritual, political, and financial) among the elite and masses, a condition which it guarded jealously. As one author describes it:

It was a widely accepted fact that any political leader who threatened to lay a finger on the Church was met with anathemas and excommunications, with prophecies of divine vengeance and with the preaching of civil war. The clergy would not only keep their revenues and their privileges; they would also fight freedom of opinion, secular education, anything that might undermine the

power which ignorance and superstition had given them over the masses.¹

As can be said for the Spanish American region as a whole, the Catholic Church during the colonial period accumulated considerable wealth. In Mexico it was considered the largest owner of land at independence. Moreover, aside from its religious mission, the Church had often served as an informal, yet powerful, financial institution in colonial society. It was the primary lender of money to creole interests, many of whom had second sons entering its service. In sum, its financial affairs and dealings were extensive and continued to be so after 1821. For many conservative elites in 1833, the Church was a symbol of the traditional stability many longed for in the troubled years after independence.

Apart from its pecuniary interests, the Mexican Church held other roles as well. At independence it remained the chief agent for public services and relief in times of crisis. However, as state-led schemes to raise sufficient revenue failed, and successive governments turned to the appropriation of Church wealth for funds, public services operated by the Church deteriorated.

Throughout the years of the Early Mexican Republic, the Church would see its wealth and influence whittled down. Its

¹Parkes, 177.

revenue generated by the collection of the tithe was coveted by many as the fix-all solution to the state's fiscal problems. "As the state's share of the tithe grew to over 54% by 1830, services provided by the Church deteriorated proportionately."²

With its loss in revenue the traditional activities of the Church were sharply curbed. Masses went unsaid and the work of public charity went undone. In the time of cholera the absence of both were sharply felt. In good measure, through the power of oratory and the rhetoric of the press, clerics went to great pains to equate the successes of cholera with the inherent evil they saw in the anti-clerical, radical government of Valentín Gómez Farías.

As has been alluded to earlier, in June of 1833, the Gómez Farías government made the first of several overt attempts to curb the power of the Church. As Michael P. Costeloe states

ecclesiastical affairs received the immediate attention of the [Radical] legislators. Recent appointments of canons were annulled, a papal-bull designating a new bishop for the Yucatán diocese was rejected, discussion of a law introducing minor changes in the clerical and military fueros was begun, and there were

²Margaret Chowning, "The Management of Church Wealth in Michoacán, Mexico, 1810-1856: Economic Motivations and Political Implications," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 22 (1990): 471.

various proposals aimed at reducing Church influence in education.³

Conservative outcry at such rapid attacks on the realm of the Church prompted Santa Anna to return from his Veracruz estate to briefly assume his duties as president. Although he obliquely denounced such legislation and tacitly promised that such extremism would be halted, he did little to alter the Gómez Farías government's anti-clerical course.

In the provinces reaction to the Radicals' proposals took the form of armed insurrection by conservative, provincial generals determined to set the nation back on a more traditionalist path. On their part, the clergy and their supporters reacted by backing such movements. Their principal tactic was to foment disturbances among the still-very-Catholic populace from the pulpit as well as through the printed word. Their intent was to sway the opinion of Santa Anna to their cause in hopes that he would oust Gómez Farías and dissolve his radical government, putting an end to the pronounced anti-clericalism of the his regime.

The numerous conservative revolts that appeared in the provinces throughout the summer of 1833 would provide Gómez Farías with a pretext for even more reactionary laws aimed at

³Michael P. Costeloe, "Santa Anna and the Gómez Farías Regime in Mexico, 1833-1834," *The Americas* 31:3 (1974): 24.

eliminating his opposition. While Santa Anna busied himself with preparing to do battle against the opponents of his government, Gómez Farías used the pretext of insurrection to continue to accelerate the delivery of his reformist package. On June 8, the Mexican congress proclaimed Gómez Farías' right to resort to the use of *facultades extraordinarias* (extraordinary powers). On the same day the clergy and religious orders were expressly prohibited from engaging in political discourse.⁴ And on June 23, the government enacted the infamous *ley del caso* which effectively exiled a number of conservative opponents, many of them Spaniards. The result was that both Santa Anna and Gómez Farías were able to eliminate common enemies.

Against this backdrop of political division and military treason, cholera entered Mexico during the first part of June from several points in the north, south and east and slowly converged upon the provincial capitals, steadily winding its way toward Mexico City. Reports of the disease's progress immediately became caught up in the rhetoric of the press. Throughout June, while cholera was claiming its first victims to the north in and around Tampico and in the south in the Yucatán, the conservative pro-clerical paper *La Antorcha* unleashed a steady stream of subtle diatribes against the

⁴Dublán, 533.

government. It linked the situation created by the anti-clericalism of Gómez Farías' administration with the impending designs of cholera on the Mexican nation and capital. Under the threat of censorship, however, papers such as *La Antorcha* were forced to couch the language of their politics in suggestive prose. On 17 June the editors sardonically wrote:

The time to speak is when there is freedom of the press, with all its guarantees as provided by the Constitution. The time to remain silent is when the drove of demagogues that abuse extraordinary faculties incite the masses to disorder and murder.

La Antorcha cannot divulge upon such sad circumstances, and allow its editors their opinions on subjects concerning revolutions, but it will relate the official version of events and publish articles concerning politics and religion, that such might enable us to know the true and sole road down which our Republic marches, in order that we might not fall into the abyss of sin that others have precipitated; we will also relate the news of the cholera morbus, the lashing [el azote] by which God has already begun to punish us.⁵

The anonymous editors of *La Antorcha* continued their invective throughout the month of June. On 19 June the paper admonished the government for failing to adequately supervise and enforce the sanitation laws designed to halt the disease's spread. And even though the paper would make sincere efforts to educate the city's public on cholera and

⁵*La Antorcha*, 17 June 1833, 4.

its prevention by publishing translations of various studies of the disease made in Europe, it could not resist the urge to suggest to its readership that the disease's spread was Providential in origin, a sign of a "divine and just wrath" against the anticlericalism of the state. "To that which rewards morality and virtue," it suggested in an unsigned editorial, "it is certainly not strange or shocking that which punishes the guilty."⁶

The government responded to such innuendo by eventually closing down the newspaper. In *La Antorcha*'s second to last edition, the pro-clerical editors proudly proclaimed that

We have the sweet pleasure of making known to our readership (while at the same time protesting) that the closure of this paper is by no means a sign of weakness, nor selfishness, nor even a tactic confession of admittance of guilt--or that we find ourselves guilty of the fact that we have given cause or reason--for the outbreak of revolution, when our sole, faithful objective has been to avoid one. It has been well-noticed that in spite of the government's granting of extraordinary powers, that in spite of having been given notice on our part of the possibility of exile, we would have continued with the same moderation of those respectable men of society that abhor revolution.

We are *hombres de bien* and in that we take pride. We have repeatedly excited our antagonists so that they may point out the articles that may qualify as insidious. We have narrowed down the questions, we have provoked a frank and liberal discussion.⁷

⁶*La Antorcha*, 19 June 1833, 4.

⁷*La Antorcha*, 29 June 1833, 4.

Throughout the summer months of 1833, efforts were made by the Church to goad and incite the public via the inflammatory language of religious pamphlets. In one such treatise, that displays a remarkable knowledge of cholera's symptoms, the Dean of the Cathedral of Mexico City warned the following:

Mexico that was in the past Catholic and religious, Mexico the favored vineyard of the Lord. How can it be that thou has become alien, foreign and odious for thy God? Alas Mexicans, in the last moments of your temporal existence when you are prostrate on your bed of pain, your limbs paralyzed and still, your eyes languid and filled with tears, your face darkened by the horrors of death, when you are abandoned by everything that now occupies you and charms you, your reason quieted, your passions silent, then the cries of your startled conscience will resound in the hollow of your heaving breast. And the respectable ministers of the Church, now despised, slandered and ridiculed, will surround you with holy zeal... imploring the mercies of heaven.⁸

The government's response to such dire incantations included a decree on June 19 that prohibited the clergy from using the pulpit for any other purpose than to deliver the word of God. It also reminded them that their duty was to

⁸Nos [sic] el Dean y Cabildo gobernador de esta santa iglesia metropolitana de Méjico (Mexico City: n.p., 1833), quoted and translated in Cecil A. Hutchinson, "The Asiatic Cholera Epidemic of 1833 in Mexico." *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 32 (1958): 9.

"inspire loyalty, in the spirit of peace, union and obedience, to the established authorities."⁹

The charge made by the editors of *La Antorcha* that the government was derelict in its duty of effectively instituting a sanitation program has some merit, but fails to appreciate the dismal fiscal conditions under which successive governments in Mexico were forced to operate. To suggest that the Gómez Farías government stood idly by and allowed cholera to close in on the capital is an inaccurate statement. To say that the government had the sufficient funds and appropriate cooperation necessary to implement a sound program of public sanitation is also false. As has been indicated earlier, state revenues had rapidly diminished in the aftermath of independence.

Although a good deal of the legislation directed at the Church was designed to limit cholera's advance, conservative propagandists interpreted any such laws involving religion or clerical issues as an unwarranted attack upon the Church's privileges. For example, a law that attempted to limit large groups of people from gathering in plazas and churches was immediately seen as anti-clerical, and hence radical in design. In arriving at their conclusions, clerical propagandists neglected the warnings put forth in the medical

⁹Dublán, 535.

pamphlets current at the time that substantiated such legislation and warned against the proven dangers linking cholera and large groups of people in crowded, unsanitary conditions. In addition, many conservative reactionaries failed to see the medical logic in a law of April 23 that prohibited religious wakes and the ceremonious display of the corpses of distinguished individuals in churches, but urged instead for rapid and efficient burials.¹⁰

That the government's actions in fighting cholera became caught up in religious and political issues does not come as a surprise. In its implementation of a coherent sanitation policy, certain funds that were made available by the government came from the recently-expropriated properties of the Church, including entailed estates once held by the clergy. Indeed, it was a fact that the government was eager to indicate. Such was the case of the properties belonging to the estate of the Duke Of Terranova y Monteleone, the Sicilian heir to Hernán Cortés.¹¹ On 27 June *La Antorcha* reported that the municipal council had ordered that all funds earned from the returns and sale of said properties (located in the state of Mexico) would be utilized

¹⁰Dublán, 508.

¹¹Charles A. Hale, *Mexican Liberalism in the Age of Mora, 1821-1853* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), 118-120.

"exclusively to prevent the epidemic from reaching the capital, or to cure those towns of the Federal District that had already been stricken by its ravages."¹²

The Radicals' attack on the Church's corporate and entailed properties was part and parcel of their economic liberalism. It also drew the most fire from the pulpit. Both Mora and Gómez Farías believed that land as a form of capital had to be freed from the hold of corporate privilege in order to promote economic progress. For them, ecclesiastical and aristocratic claims to property rights were contrary to the interests of the Mexican citizenry as a whole.¹³

The secularization of the Californian missions in August of 1833, during the height of the epidemic, was perhaps the most important piece of liberal reform against the holdings of the Church since the renewed attacks on the tithe. In turn, it served as yet another clarion for the conservative opposition and prompted renewed attacks by many pious souls convinced that cholera was surely the Lord's revenge. The government paper *El Telégrafo* justified the expropriation of Church property on the grounds that the missions were being

¹²*La Antorcha*, 27 June 1833, 4.

¹³Hale, 118.

run by "frail Spanish monks that governed despotically over the Indians and monopolized commerce, exacting hefty sums."¹⁴

As the cholera epidemic progressed during the summer months of 1833, many published sermons and religious sonnets appeared in the city's streets, establishments and homes attacking the Radicals' policies and those who supported them. One such sonnet warned:

Sinner! Tread lightly.
 The multitudes that have been laid to rest
 by this terrible pest that has plagued
 a place so healthy, pure, populated!
 There you will see the poor, the powerful,
 the weak, the robust. the valiant,
 the ardent young man,
 the cold old man,
 the well-mannered and the vice-ridden.
 Why have you not perished?
 How have you lived?
 What is it that you possess more than that
 Providence of a God, who loves you greatly, and
 who has wanted you to live so that you may do
 your penance.¹⁵

Other sonnets, heavy with religious metaphor and symbolism, beseeched the populace to renew its faith in the wisdom of the Church.

What victim that when by his ailment is overtaken
 Does not desire a rapid cure?
 What traveler upon seeing himself misguided
 Does not ask for the familiar path?
 What businessman that finds himself squandered
 Does not search for the cause of his ruin?

¹⁴*El Telégrafo*, 15 July 1833, 3.

¹⁵Anonymous, *Soneto. Pecador! Escamina cuidadosa...*, "SPC (Mexico City: n.p., 1833).

What peasant upon seeing the thief approach
 Does not take up arm to protect himself?
 Such a man is ill with sin!

Wandering traveler, precarious merchant,
 and pitiful, forsaken peasant.
 What will be your cure? Go forth to the
 sanctuary and lament your sad misdeeds,
 And saddened, save yourself within the
 fortress of the ROSARY!¹⁶

Perhaps no other individual strove as hard to discredit the regime of Valentín Gómez Farías as did the pro-clerical, conservative lawyer, Carlos María Bustamante. As a stalwart propagandist of the Conservatives and a personal enemy of Gómez Farías, Bustamante consistently went to great pains to use cholera as a weapon in his assault on the government. In his historical journal, Bustamante wrote that "the memory of the government of Gómez Farías struck fear in the hearts of Mexicans just as did Robespierre put fear in the hearts of the French."¹⁷ "Extraordinary faculties and the *ley del caso* were the currency of the time."¹⁸

In his chronicle of the cholera epidemic, Bustamante portrays Gómez Farías as a blinded demagogue motivated by greed and vindictiveness. He writes that

¹⁶Anonymous, *Soneto. ¿Qué enfermo, de su mal sobrecoído... ?* SPC (Mexico City: Imprenta de Valdés, 1833).

¹⁷Carlos María Bustamante, *Cuadro Histórico*, BLC (Mexico City: n.p., 1835), 157.

¹⁸Carlos María Bustamante, *La Voz de la Patria*, BLC (Mexico City: n.p., 1833), 224.

in the middle of this horrible confusion the only thing that remained firm and consistent were the principles of persecution of those that governed us; blindness accompanied reprobation. His hatred multiplied and doubled back on his efforts to sing a triumph over his enemies. Never have such measures been taken to gather wealth, to attack the sacred right of property and to mock the guarantees outlined in the constitution.¹⁹

Bustamante's diatribe further strengthened the clergy's resolve to incite the lower classes against the radicalism of Gómez Farías. In his typically caustic, imaginative prose Bustamante claims that in the midst of the epidemic's darkest days thousands of people flocked to the city's churches to renew their faith.

The capital found itself in such a state of commotion and upheaval that no one dared not to place themselves favorably in the eyes of God in case they should suffer His judgment. Former enemies reconciled their differences, broken marriages were mended, items stolen from Churches were returned to the hands of priests, and one noticed a great change in the comportment of persons formerly notorious and unruly. Confessors received from droves of penitents prohibited books in great volume whose indulgent passages had destroyed their morality; having been spared by the hand of cholera, one would put in the hands of their confessor a small key saying to him 'take from the drawer from which this key belongs the manuscripts that lie therein; take them and burn them, because they do not contain anything more than ridiculous plans and

¹⁹Carlos María Bustamante, *Historia del Cholera Morbus*, BLC (Mexico City: n.p., 1833), 202.

projects that I had invented to destroy the religion that I profess.'²⁰

Despite the half-hearted attempts at prevention and the inflammatory prose of the opposition, cholera arrived in Mexico City on August 6, 1833. By the second week of August the disease had begun to take a heavy toll of life in the capital. Conservative reaction responded predictably. On August 12, 1833, *La Columna* published an article that refuted many widely shared observations and assumptions concerning the history, cause and cure of Asiatic cholera. Written by the Archbishop of Mexico City and heavy with religious connotations, this reactionary tract bluntly proclaimed that everything that had been written concerning cholera--"*esta peregrinan [sic] enfermedad*" [this spreading sickness]--since its arrival in Mexico the previous spring was a complete lie, "round like a miller's wheel." He labeled recent tracts on the pathology of the disease as "pure charlatanism" written by "heretic doctors."²¹ Moreover, the Archbishop rejected outright the opinions and advice of the Mexican medical community of which Gómez Farías, a physician by training, was a member. Instead he queries:

How can these quacks--profane men--possibly know of the cure of a disease so celestial and

²⁰Ibid., 204.

²¹*La Columna*, 12 August 1833, 1.

divine in origin? Attacking the body, it is able to take from the streets the souls of a certain class of serpents that have introduced the pest into the Lord's flock. Their doctors maintain that their knowledge of the disease will naturally guide them to a discovery of a cure. We must pass judgment on them and ask, when have they communicated with God or been graced with the aid of His knowledge and the revelation that cholera morbus is not a disease of Asian origin, nor brought to Europe by the armies of the Holy Alliance, but rather *el ángel exterminador del día* [the exterminating angel of the day], sent by the furry of heaven justly irritated by the heretical, impious, blasphemous and non-Catholic way of life that has been introduced into our Republic?²²

The Bishop's denunciations gathered momentum and quickly took the form of a diatribe against the radical bend of the Gómez Farías regime and the accepted science of the day. He retorts:

This disease does not call for healing potions but rather reform of the intellect and of the heart. Just as sin is born from sensuality, intellectual faculties have cooperated to pervert the religiosity and Catholicism of the Mexican people.

Those incredulous souls that read this piece will see that it is not only a well of evangelical doctrine but rather a most luminous treaty on spiritual pathology in which are described with mastery the diseases of our souls.²³

²²Ibid.

²³Ibid.

Warning of an impending damnation should the state continue its present course, the Archbishop ends his tract with a summary of conservative, clerical thought against recent attacks on the Church's corporate rights and properties. Defending the right of the Church to hold property, he argues that the wealth that Cortés accumulated during the Conquest, "risking his life by spreading the Christian faith in the service of God, was his [and subsequently of his heirs, the Duke Of Terranova y Monteleone's] by divine right."²⁴ In regard to the patronato, he states that it is the prerogative of the Pope and the Pope alone, and that "the wrath of God will fall upon any one who argues otherwise." "The Pope is not just the Bishop of Rome, as the impious refer to him," he adds, "but rather the Bishop of the Universal Church and only he can divide, donate or revoke the Church's properties."²⁵ Concerning the issue of ecclesiastical privileges (*fueros*), the Archbishop claims that they too hail from divine right with the purpose to serve the altar and defend the Church from heretics. In addition, he warns that "the civil powers that choose to abolish or modify such privileges, will choose

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵Ibid.

to incur ecclesiastical and military indignation."²⁶ And finally, in defense of the much besieged tithes, he claims they are the exclusive property of the Church. "Anything to the contrary is anathema."²⁷

Over a month later on 14 September, 1833, as cholera's presence was subsiding in the capital, an anonymous editor of *La Columna* responded to the Archbishop's seething by pointing out that everywhere cholera has gone it has produced such false prophets screaming of the Lord's revenge: in India, the Brakmanes; in Russia, the Greek Orthodox; in England, the Reformists; in Mexico, the Ultramontanes. "It is the *pueblo* [people] that is the victim," the writer claimed. "It is these same false prophets that seek to impose upon the nation a dictatorship that rules with an iron bar, to sustain the *fueros* and the Catholic, Apostolic, Roman religion."²⁸

The specter of cholera and the manner in which it entered the political discourse during Gómez Farías' regime no doubt fueled the popular opposition that Santa Anna began to opportunistically sense.²⁹ That cholera provided a

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸*La Columna*, 14 September 1833, 3.

²⁹Michael Costeloe, *La primera república federal de México 1824-1835* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1975), 384.

pretext for Gómez Farías to enact repressive measures, as many conservative detractors have alluded, however, is difficult to prove. Gómez Farías' acceptance of extraordinary powers from the Mexican congress in early June, 1833, was part and parcel of the politics of the day. However, efforts by the clergy to incite the masses against his radicalism, and link the epidemic with the wrath of God, eventually produced the desired result. In the words of one student of Mexican history, "If the clergy were the propagandists and the paymasters of reaction, its chief source of power was the army."³⁰

The growing indignation of the clergy and the wealthy creoles was unbounded, and army officers began to rebel, raising the cry of *religión y fueros*. The forces of nature [had] allied themselves with those of the Church and made it easy for the priests to arouse superstitious.³¹

Striking a middle note, the steadily more moderate paper *La Columna*, stressed that the epidemic's ravages served as a temperance of sort and was Providential in origin, serving to eliminate both the demagogues and the pseudo-prophets from Mexican society. As the epidemic's days came to an end, the editors reflected that

³⁰Parkes, 177.

³¹Ibid., 197.

although it should not be permitted to rejoice or profit from such calamity, by the limited good that has resulted, we will console ourselves to say that such destructive catastrophes--similar to volcanic eruptions that purify the air, that fertilize the soil--bring forth the opportunity to diminish our vices and revitalize the morality of our ways due to the terror that they cause. We firmly believe that Providence, at times, sends forth such universal calamities in order to better a people.³²

³²*La Columna*, 14 September 1833, 2.

CHAPTER 6

INSURRECTION

The years of warfare and upheaval surrounding Mexico's independence resulted in a militarization of Mexican society and introduced into the political arena a new group of contenders, the provincial caudillos.¹ Often of creole, landowning roots, the caudillos were men of charisma and local influence. As such they were largely responsible for the political mobilization of provincial society due to their ability to attract a loyal following of armed men. Many of them had fought during the wars of independence and later gained commissions as officers of the post-independence Mexican Army. Many, most notably Santa Anna, would emerge as the political powerbrokers that would guide the nation into the midcentury.

¹Tulio Halperín Donghi, *The Contemporary History of Latin America*, edited and translated by John C. Chasteen (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 74. For a discussion of the historiographical treatment of caudillos and caudillismo see, Frank Safford, "Politics, Ideology and Society," in *Spanish America After Independence, c.1820-c.1870*, edited by Leslie Bethell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 72-76.

The caudillos walked a thin line during the years of the Mexican republic. Some historians have viewed them as ruthless opportunists, others as cultured visionaries. Charismatic by nature, they courted the favor of elite interests and were a group to be reckoned with by any government--centrist or federalist, conservative or liberal--bent on introducing change. Depending on the politics of their patron, the caudillos could be whipped into action whenever a newly-formed government threatened local interests. Scorned by some and praised by others, their influence over the political climate of the Early Mexican Republic has earned the period the unofficial title of the Era of Pronunciamientos.²

As could be expected, Gómez Farías was not immune to the threat of caudillo-led *pronunciamientos* (uprisings) against his liberal, reformist regime. The Radicals' desire to rid Mexican politics of the military's power of "veto through revolt" gained them few supporters from the military's ranks. As an expert on Mexican army politics of the age states:

The goal of the Federalist military reform program plainly was to weaken the regular army militarily and to depoliticize it so that it would never again intervene in the affairs of the states to suppress the autonomy of their

²Sierra, 201.

political authorities as it had done under Bustamante.³

The Radicals' reforms directed at the military and the Church struck deep at the heart of conservative interests. The state of Michoacán, an area in which Spanish colonial society had sunk its roots the deepest, would be the first to produce a conservative-backed insurrection proclaiming *fueros y religión*. The once prosperous hacienda-based economy there had experienced a decline for nearly two decades. The steady erosion of landed wealth had soured many elites' opinion of the new liberalism guiding the country. Correspondingly, the Church in Michoacán also experienced a sharp decline in revenues from the tithe during the 1820s and was unwillingly to tolerate the increasingly anti-clerical policies of the capital.⁴

On 26 May 1833, in the provincial capital of Morelia, Captain Ignacio Escalada pronounced against the federal government in Mexico City pledging allegiance to the Church

³Frank N. Samponaro, "Santa Anna and the Abortive Anti-Federalist Revolt of 1833 in Mexico," *The Americas* 40 (1983): 98.

⁴Jan Bazant, "From Independence to the Liberal Republic, 1821-1867," in *Mexico since Independence*, edited by Leslie Bethell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 3. Bazant estimates that during the 1820s the tithe income of the Church in Michoacán was reduced by over seventy-five percent. See also Margaret Chowning, "The Management of Church Wealth in Michoacán, Mexico, 1810-1856," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 22 (1990): 459-496.

and its privileges. In doing so he appealed to Santa Anna in Mexico City to defend the cause through his office as supreme chief of the nation. Although Santa Anna tacitly declined to associate himself with Escalada's revolt, it soon became apparent that it was not an isolated event. On 1 June a similar pronunciamiento occurred in Tlalpan (in the state of Puebla) under the leadership of General Gabriel Durán, a cavalry officer proclaiming to defend religion and the fueros.⁵

What effect did the cholera epidemic of 1833 have on the many conservative-backed pronunciamientos that appeared in the provinces in reaction to Gómez Farías' radical government? It can easily be surmised that the epidemic introduced into the Mexican political scene an additional element of instability at a time when governmental institutions and political alliances were at their weakest. The myriad uprisings that appeared in the provinces only compounded this fact and, as this chapter will show, aided in the proliferation of the disease.

Historically, armies have been principal agents in the spread of disease. In fact, the first world-wide pandemic of cholera that began in 1817 in the Ganges delta of India and reached Europe via Russia and the Adriatic was indisputably

⁵*El Telégrafo*, 2 June 1833, 2.

aided by the constant presence of roaming armies--mobile hosts to contagious disease.⁶

When Santa Anna took to the field on 10 June to put down the uprisings of Escalada and Durán, his deputy commander, General Mariano Arista, defected and took him prisoner. The event precipitated a mutiny in the capital by regular army troops that was quickly put down by the local civil militia loyal to Gómez Farías. Although Santa Anna would later escape his imprisonment under less-than-clear circumstances and renew his commitment to the radical government, the activities of the insurgent generals would continue largely unchecked throughout the summer of 1833.⁷ Concerning the ambiguity surrounding Santa Anna's capture and subsequent escape, an expert on the era maintains that

the truth behind these events remains a mystery. Circumstantial evidence, innumerable allegations, and perhaps logical analysis of the situation, would indicate that Santa Anna was indeed implicated in the several revolts and that he hoped to use them to make himself a dictator.⁸

In rebuffing extremist claims that cholera's successes were the fault of the government, the liberal-backed paper *El*

⁶James Burke, *The Day the Universe Changed* (London: London Writers Ltd., 1985), 195; 222.

⁷Costeloe, "Santa Anna and the Gómez Farías Regime in Mexico, 1833-1834," *The Americas* 31:3 (1974): 26-30.

⁸*Ibid.*, 30.

Demócrata alluded in several articles, throughout August and September that blame for the epidemic's steady advance and destruction could be placed squarely on the shoulders of the leaders of the conservative revolts that were continually being staged in the provinces. On 1 August, the paper lamented that ultramontanes conspiring with ambitious generals were behind efforts to incite the masses to revolt.

It is not the Mexican Church that raises the voice of rebellion; it is not the Church that indiscreetly incites those to revolt in order that they might follow a bloodied standard; it is those ambitious ones that cover themselves with vestments of hypocrisy, aspiring criminals that ingratiate and elevate themselves in order to attack and ruin the prosperity of the nation.⁹

In reaction to the news of Escalada's revolt, the official government paper *El Telégrafo* published an editorial written by the pro-Radical governor of the state of San Luís de Potosí, Vicente Romero. In it, Romero delivers a classic liberal condemnation of the scourge of pronunciamientos plaguing the countryside. He suggests the pretense that Escalada's revolt is part of a monarchist plot to redeliver Mexico into the hands of the king of Spain. Referring to Escalada's revolt, he states:

This hypocritical soldier, supposing that we are living in the eighteenth century, is deluded and fancies himself a Mohammed

⁹*El Demócrata*, 1 August 1833, 1.

promising to save the religion of Christ and the fueros of the Church and military. Could he be so impudent? When was Christ in need of such self-esteemed apostles to safeguard the religion of peace? Could anything be more insolent?

His project is barbarous and it offends the good senses of the Mexican people. It has invoked the illustrious defender of Tampico [Santa Anna] and all that he has fought to protect. [Escalada] defies religion, disgraces honor and patriotism, offends the Nation, and above all, seeks to discover a way to implement a new form of government, involving himself in a criminal project of making negotiations to return Mexico to the Bourbon King of Spain.¹⁰

The most formidable of the conservative uprisings against Gómez Farías involved the continuation of the effort began in June by General Durán, now joined by his caudillo cohort Mariano Arista, Santa Anna's traitorous deputy commander of the previous campaign.

On 2 August 1833, *El Demócrata* published a dispatch that had been intercepted by the government's forces. Arista and Durán were reported to be operating in the vicinity of Querétaro, northwest of Mexico City. In collusion with Generals Palacios and Lázaro del Corral to the south near Cuernavaca, they were planning a two-pronged advance on Mexico City.¹¹ The following day the paper reported that Arista and Durán had sacked the town of San Juan del Río

¹⁰*El Telégrafo*, 6 June 1833, 2.

¹¹*El Demócrata*, 2 August 1833, 1-4.

southeast of the capital in order to re-supply their insurgent troops. The editors of *El Demócrata* made quick use of the event to discredit the cause of the conservative insurrectionaries. They pointed out that

for as much as they profess and feign to pose as the defenders of religion, quite the opposite their perversities appear. Their deeds that become known with each step they take are nothing more than those of a large group of thugs and assassins that disturb the tranquillity of families, attack all classes of property, and rob even the goods of the Church whose cause they proclaim to defend.¹²

Arista and Durán continued their marauding in the vicinity of Querétaro and were able to amass an army considerable enough to again warrant Santa Anna's attention. A decision was made to lead a punitive force against it. As preparations were made by Santa Anna to depart from Mexico City to engage the force coming from the northwest, however, cholera entered the capital. After he departed and began his travel north, reports soon filtered in that the disease had joined and struck his ranks. As the general later wrote in his autobiography:

In order to stop Arista's scandalous acts and to prevent their spreading further, I marched six thousand men to Guanajuato, where the rebel army was still in revolt. Cholera morbus had just entered Mexico, and a terrible epidemic struck my ranks while we were passing through the heavy rains in the Bajío. The

¹²*El Demócrata*, 3 August 1833, 2.

dreaded disease ravaged and incapacitated a third of my force, causing me to delay back to Allende, where the epidemic had not reached. I remained in Allende during the worse part of the season, replenished my troops, and continued on to Guanajuato, which was also free of cholera.¹³

Reporting on Santa Anna's campaign and the wake of death that followed it, Bustamante criticized the government's commitment of forces into the field at such a dangerous time. He recorded one source as saying that "from Querétaro on, one does not need to ask the way because it is indicated by buzzards devouring cadavers sprawled throughout the countryside. One sees nothing but soldiers dead and stripped naked."¹⁴

Reports of the same fate being met by the forces of Arista and Durán also began to appear. On August 6, *El Demócrata* reported that when Durán passed through Celaya, thirty miles west of Querétaro, he left behind "nine of his men who had fallen beneath their horses, stricken by cholera."¹⁵

¹³Ann Fears Crawford, *The Eagle: The Autobiography of Santa Anna* (Austin: The Pemberton Press, 1967), 47-48.

¹⁴Carlos María de Bustamante, *Historia del Cholera Morbus en México*, BLC (Mexico City, n.p.: 1835), 206.

¹⁵*El Demócrata*, 6 August 1833, 4.

For both Santa Anna's force and that of the opposing faction of Arista and Durán, the entire month of August would bring continual news of cholera's toll on the armies of each. One source has estimated that Santa Anna alone lost half of the 2,000 men that he entered the field with.¹⁶ Arista and Durán would suffer similar fates with one paper reporting the it was largely responsible for decimating their forces.¹⁷ Cholera would rapidly diminish the threat that each posed to the state. When the epidemic subsided, Santa Anna would finally catch up with Arista in early October and soundly defeat him with a much larger force. Durán would remain at large, but subsequently posed no real threat to the government. He eventually escaped to Guatemala where he died in exile.¹⁸

To the south of Mexico City, similar developments unfolded. On 14 September the moderate faction's paper *La Columna* reported on the ill-fated progress and virtual dissolution of the insurrectionary force led by insurgent generals Corral and Palacios. Tasked with advancing from the south toward Mexico City to engage the loyalist General Valencia, the contingent had been dissipated by cholera as it

¹⁶Huthchinson, 22.

¹⁷*El Demócrata*, 15 August 1833, 4.

¹⁸Samponaro, 105-106.

approached Cuernavaca. It was forced to retreat some forty miles south to Iguala, "leaving its stricken victims dying along the roadside."¹⁹ The paper also reported that both Corral and Palacios were afflicted, but it did not divulge their fate. The paper did make an effort to strike fear in the hearts of its readership by solemnly asking, "What will become of their downtrodden, cadaverous remains? What hope do they have, surrounded by enemies, by pestilence, submerged in the bitter miasma that they must breathe?"²⁰ The paper concluded by reporting that the eighteen new cases of cholera reported in the capital could be attributed to the arrival of persons recently infected while fleeing the pillage of the insurrectionary force. It made quick use of the possibility that the many insurrections in the provinces were largely to blame for the disease's spread.

In conclusion, in regard to the many barrack revolts that sprung out throughout Gómez Farías' tenure in office, one authority on the period has argued that the reason that they never coalesced and came to pose a real threat was because they lacked the recognition and leadership of Santa Anna who held the respect and loyalty of many junior officers

¹⁹*La Columna*, 14 September 1833, 3.

²⁰*Ibid.*

at the time.²¹ In most cases Santa Anna was able to despatch an able force into the field to effectively disable and disarm any force that began to pose too much of a challenge.²² There can be no doubt, however, that on the opposing side cholera severely hindered the ability of reactionary military leaders to successfully attract or marshal a sizable and threatening enough force--one that might have convinced Santa Anna sooner that conditions were ripe for his return to the presidency.

It would not be until May, 1834, almost a year after cholera first struck Mexico, that Santa Anna finally sensed that the time was right to reassert his colorful personality in political affairs. Gómez Farías' hold on power would come to an uneventful end when Santa Anna shrewdly sensed that conservative opposition to his liberal program had become significantly widespread and heated.²³ Although it would be a renewed and realigned opposition that would send Gómez Farías packing, cholera's role as a catalyst in influencing events. Nor should one forget that the constant threat and fear of cholera presented Santa Anna with a logistical

²¹Samponaro, 103.

²²Frank N. Samponaro. "La Alianza de Santa Anna y Los Federalistas," *Historia Mexicana* 30:3 (1981): 383.

²³Samponaro, "Santa Anna...," 96.

problem of complex dimensions, one that might have hindered his ability to conduct a large-scale military offensive should the need have arisen. Indeed, one could interpret Santa Anna's opportunistic decision to wait for the cholera epidemic to subside before returning to power as a sign of his devious, calculating mind.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

The liberal paper *El Fénix de la Libertad* would declare in its first issue of 1834 that the previous year had been a good one for the newly-independent republic of Mexico. "The nation's colonial institutions had never been so boldly attacked and the privileged classes had suffered almost daily reverses."¹ The year was blighted, however, by the impact of the first of several cholera epidemics that would strike the nation throughout the remainder of the nineteenth century. Besides claiming what one source has estimated to be at least 10,000 lives in Mexico City alone, the epidemic served to sharply polarize and heighten tensions between conservative and liberal factions.² Indeed, the study of the epidemic and the historical sources it produced provide rich insight into their respective ideologies. For many in the Mexico of 1833, be they part of the ignorant masses, the pious clergy, the educated elite or the land-owning class, cholera's presence and its high human toll no doubt stirred their consciences

¹Cited in Costeloe, "Santa Anna...," 35.

²Hutchinson, 159-160.

and their souls. In terms of the liberal politics of the day the disease's devastation demanded reflection on not only temporal concerns, but religious ones as well. And finally, the cholera epidemic of 1833 in Mexican history also serves to demonstrate the profound impact a natural disaster can have not only in medical and human terms, but throughout society.

The most pressing political question that emerges from this study is the degree to which the cholera epidemic of 1833 was responsible for the Radicals' fall from power and the reassertion of a centrist model of government led by Santa Anna. Gómez Farías' administration marked the first real opportunity for radical liberal change in Mexico. In historical retrospect, however, given the stormy course that Mexico, and Latin America as a whole, would follow into the twentieth century, the tendency might be to minimize the impact of the event. Given the schism that existed in Mexican society between the creole elite and largely mestizo and Indian masses, there is little indication that any of the ambitious reforms of Gómez Farías could have possibly come to fruition so soon after independence. In 1833, the legacy and remnants of colonial institutions and culture were simply too strong to oppose any sort of rapid change.

As a self-styled mediator and agent of stability Santa Anna's altruistic claims to be uninterested in politics and the presidency of Mexico became less and less convincing

after the summer of 1833. His resumption of his duties as president in 1834 marked a turning point in the political history of the Early Republic, as the country turned once more to centralism and *caudillismo* as an answer to its problems. Mexico was once again set upon a conservative path. In the words of one historian

Hailed as the savior of Mexico by the clergy, who pronounced his coup d'état to be 'the holiest revolution our republic has ever seen,' [Santa Anna] removed Farías from office, assumed dictatorial powers, repealed the anticlerical legislation, dismissed congress, locked the door of the Hall of Sessions, and put the key in his pocket. When the liberals in Zacatecas rebelled he crushed them with merciless brutality. Farías, Mora and Zavala [the liberal governor of the state of Mexico] were driven into exile--the two latter never to return. It was to be a quarter of a century before the liberals were to recover from this blow inflicted upon them.³

The cholera epidemic of 1833 was the first but not the last one Mexico City would suffer through during the nineteenth century. When the disease struck again in 1849, 1853, 1857, 1866, 1872, and 1882 it served to force the *cabildo* of Mexico City to undertake greater efforts to modernize the city's infrastructure and further develop the theories of public health and sanitation originally formulated during the first epidemic.⁴ The medical community

³Parkes, 197.

⁴Hutchinson, 162.

as well would make valuable observations toward the prevention of cholera and other diseases. By doing so it further expanded its role as both a professional organization and agent of social reform.

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