

L'Amérique Latine: French Imperialism in Mexico, 1861-1867

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An Empire of Imagination: Narrative and Construction of Informal Empire

Archduke Ferdinand Maximilian von Hapsburg, younger brother of the Emperor Franz Joseph of Austria, entered Mexico City in May 1864 to wild acclaim. Soon to be crowned the first Emperor of Mexico, Maximilian arrived in splendor; adorned in golden livery, he was fêted by the rich and cheered by the poor alike. A correspondent to the *New York Commercial*—no stranger to wild extravaganzas—took the opportunity to remonstrated with his readers that this was no “whirlwind of excitement that means nothing more than an effervescent sense of relief from one trouble before another.” It was the real deal. Moreover, adulation was not restricted to public displays; private effusions were equally glowing. Observers lauded Maximilian for his lineage—“a descendant of sixty-three sovereigns”—as well as his breeding. A sovereign born to command, his Christianity was contrasted against the “vagabonds and cut throats and villains [that had] so often been installed as 'Presidents.’”¹ But only a few years later, in 1867, once public support had faded—and French troops had been withdrawn—Maximilian would stand before a firing squad. Partially a victim of his own hubris and short-sidedness; nevertheless, the tragedy of Maximilian I lies in his willingness to become a pawn in Napoleon III's dreams of a revived French Empire in America. Hemmed in by Continental balance of power politics, and constrained by the expanding power of the United States, Napoleon III turned to Maximilian to create an informal system of alliances and puppet-kingdoms in Mexico.² In effect, Napoleon III hoped to create an informal French empire in the Americas.

1 “Popularity of Maximilian in Mexico,” *The Farmer's Cabinet*, August 25, 1864, 1.

2 In a rhetorical coup still extant, Napoleon III used the phrase “Latin America” to illustrate the linkage between his Bourbon monarchy and former Spanish rulers in Mexico, hoping to consolidate support amongst his own people and the monarchs of Europe.

Informal empire is often viewed as domination by other means; economic persuasion precludes conquest by means of arms, or coercion by checkbook instead of by the point of the sword. Foreign interest, loans and monetary support prevent true independence by making a nation dependent upon the largesse of another. That the lending country is often militarily dominant is beside the point; informal empire rests solely upon the manipulation of the weaker by the stronger using economic, cultural or technological means. Weakness is generally defined as a function of its military and economy, that is, a rich nation is rarely dominated by a poor one in informal relationships. Mexico, in the early to mid-nineteenth century was a relatively strong nation, with European arms and training. However, after overthrowing her Spanish overlords, she suffered severe setbacks as governments shifted between Monarchists and Republicans contesting for power. Civil war became the norm as governments were frequently overthrown. By the 1860s, Mexico had devolved to near-anarchy. Incurring massive debt and unable to establish a working government, she looked easy prey to any nation willing to brave the ire of the growing United States. When the United States descended into civil war, Mexico's weakness became all the more apparent, and France invaded. Because informal empires so strongly revolve around economic interests, this model only works if Napoleon III invaded only, or primarily, for economic reasons, to establish economic dominance through coercive ends, and sought to establish or support a subservient government willing to pursue primarily French economic interests.

Examinations of French foreign policy in America tend to focus on South America before 1848 and concentrate on economic concerns. Despite an unwillingness to challenge British supremacy, French interests compelled military entanglements in South America in the costly Rio Plata war between the Argentine Confederation and Uruguay. Border negotiations and

contests over river access and trade drove French involvement.³ Commerce, in this case, drove policy. As the historian Robin Winks, explains, empires (including the French) after 1857 operated upon modes which emphasized commercial products and financial power beyond territorial holdings. Citing Charles Fay's *Imperial Economy and its Place in the Formation of Economic Doctrine, 1600-1932*, Winks points to a necessary condition of informal empire: that the country have at least some control “so that a trading pattern, an enlarged port, a railway, or an enemy made at the price of extraterritoriality could be expected to pay or to offset dividends not just next year” but for many years to come. Winks argues that informal empire arises when a technologically superior society is not sufficiently superior to dominate another society outright, as is the case in formal empires.⁴ Influence, he decides, is the goal, not dominance, and an informal empire provides just that. Furthermore, concern over balance of power lead many to institute forms of informal imperialism; the classic example he uses is that of British acquiescence to unilateral demands by the United States and abstaining from establishing a formal empire in South America—the same argument used in reverse to justify Louis Napoleon's intervention in Mexico. The final distinction he makes is that informal empires often create sub-informal empires, which expand to include additional territories.⁵

With these classifications in mind, Mexico becomes a clear example of informal empire by imperial means, or rather, that Napoleon III sought to extend his influence in the New World—as well as with the traditional authorities on the European continent such as the Pope, and the

3 Iwan Morgan, “French Ideas of a Civilizing Mission in South America, 1830-1848,” *Canadian Journal of History* 16 (1981): 379. See also: Iwan Morgan, “French Policy in Spanish America: 1830-48,” *Journal of Latin American Studies* 10 (1978): 309-328.

4 Such as the Dutch or British Empires. Although physical domination is inherent to empire, the outright subjugation of a people and economic manipulation distinguish the two forms of empire.

monarchs of Austria, Italy and Spain—by creating puppet monarchies throughout the Americas. Napoleon III expected to conquer Mexico as a matter of course. Nearly twenty years earlier, the world witnessed the United States march from Veracruz to Mexico City virtually unopposed, and Napoleon’s military advisors offered similar prediction. Moreover, John Bigelow, head of the American legation in Paris, writing to Secretary of State Seward, expresses his private concerns that the United States lacked the political will to interfere with France in Mexico. Without a pressing national concern, the United States would not “transfer to their own shoulders a burden which is crushing the Emperor of France and from which they shrank in 1847.”⁶

Historians have traditionally viewed the French intervention in Mexico in terms of balance of power politics, seeing in it a response to western expansion by the United States. This paper hopes to disengage the narrative from a strictly American perspective and instead examine the adventuring spirit that put a European monarch upon a Mexican throne, as well as explore the complex set of motives that inspired Napoleon III, emperor of a resurgent French nation, to embark on such a disastrous campaign. The theory of informal empire thus helps explain the motivations of Napoleon III and illuminates the diverse means by which Napoleon III propagandized his war and garnered popular support.

5 Robin W. Winks, “On Decolonization and Informal Empire,” *The American Historical Review* 81 (1976): 540-556. For “informal empire,” see Charles R. Fay, *Imperial Economy and its Place in the Formation of Economic Doctrine, 1600-1932* (Oxford, 1934). It is interesting to note that as formal empires expand, they often absorb neighboring territories and create larger and more complex bureaucracies to administer them. The theory of informal empire suggests that instead of absorbing new territories directly into the body politic, each new territory is economically subsumed by the other. In essence, it is a kind of imperial pyramid scheme.

6 Bigelow, 152.

In a system as hierarchical as the Second Empire, banking houses and the aristocracy levied power and authority; their support was necessary for the endeavor to succeed. The diverse reasons Napoleon III espoused for invading Mexico appealed to each of these sectors. Popular thought at the time saw Louis Napoleon undertaking a Catholic crusade against the spreading stain of Protestantism, and Catholic leaders expected Napoleon III and Maximilian to undertake religious reforms in Mexico. With liberal reformers restricting the power of Mexican clerics, as well as nationalizing Church lands, Europeans saw the steady usurpation of the Pope's temporal powers and imagined the French intervention in clearly defined religious roles. Furthermore, the French ideology of civilizing mission propelled her to expand the realm of science, manners and law by means of conquest and colonization; her recent occupation of Algeria and subsequent expansionist adventures throughout the East Indies helped form and crystallize a notion of colonization as a means of civilizing under-developed nations. Thus, Napoleon III saw Mexico as a means not only of bolstering the political dominance of his own nation, but his personal spiritual authority as well.

Yo-Yo Imperialism: The Contraction, Expansion and Retraction of French Empire, 1789-1860

When the *ancient régime* collapsed in 1789, French overseas territories in the New World, from Canada to the Caribbean revolted or were sold to foreign countries. The universal values of the Revolution inspired the slave revolt of Saint-Domingue, which saw France lose her West Indies holdings; in an effort to forestall British naval dominance of the Atlantic, Napoleon I sold the massive Mississippi River drainage area to the United States. Believing that the rich

port of New Orleans provided the key to Atlantic trade routes, but unable to fully exploit those advantages, Napoleon I hoped the United States would grow to the detriment of the British. When his plans to establish an Orleanist dynasty in Mexico failed, France was bereft of her once massive holdings in North America. Though the idea of expansion to her “natural borders”⁷ had been a singular French pursuit throughout the *ancien régime*, the collapse of the Napoleonic order left France without a single overseas colony.⁸ France recouped a few, smaller colonies in the Treaty of Paris following Napoleon’s defeat. Spread strategically throughout the world, they tempted France with economic growth and imperial glory without the accompanying resources necessary to fully exploit them. These included her West Indies colonies of Martinique and Guadeloupe; in South America, Guyane;⁹ a smattering of small islands in the Atlantic; and the five *comptoirs* of India. Two outposts in Senegal completed the allotment. Compared to Britain's vast imperial holdings, France was “a much reduced imperial power.”¹⁰

Algeria was the first blatantly imperial acquisition. In 1827, the Algerian *bey*, a client to the Ottoman sultan, struck the French ambassador six times with a ceremonial fly-swatter when he came to pay his respects following Ramadan. The story goes that a Jewish wheat merchant was unable to settle accounts with the *bey* because of monies owed to him by France from the disastrous 1798 invasion of Egypt. The current government, unwilling to pay for debts incurred

7 Like “Manifest Destiny” has often changed to incorporate popular expansionist tendencies in American history, the concept of “natural borders” has metamorphosed to accommodate French imperial designs.

8 Robert Aldrich, *Greater France: A History of French Overseas Expansion* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996), 20.

9 This would later be home to Devil’s Island, a penal colony built along the British model.

10 Aldrich, 20.

by a previous one, refused payment. When the *bey* asked the French ambassador about these debts, the ambassador is reputed to have answered that the French king did not discuss matters of money with the likes of him. At this point, the ambassador found himself the recipient of those fateful swats and he was forced to flee. Three years later, embroiled in domestic difficulties, Charles X warped the incident into an affront to French honor. Nearly 40,000 troops were sent to avenge this slight and after months of warfare conquered Algiers. The military successes in Algeria, however, were unable to save Charles X; a *coup d'etat* unseated the king and placed Louis Phillipe on his throne.

The July Monarchy, as his rule came to be called, regarded Algeria with general apathy. Faced with the challenge of administering the thin littoral strip between the Mediterranean and the Sahara, and battling Abd el-Khader's guerilla forces, he opted for a policy of consolidation, choosing to ignore expansion. Instead of expanding his African holdings, Louis Phillipe focused on rapprochement with the British and increased trade protection for domestic producers in colonial markets.¹¹ Despite his overtures toward non-aggression—a kind of soft isolationism—military endeavors in the New World consumed the bulk of French attention, money and troops. Allied with the British, the French navy engaged in regime-building in South America in the Rio Plata region between the Argentine Confederation and Uruguay. Furthermore, in an effort to protect the honor of, and extract debts owed to French citizens in Mexico, the French navy fired upon the port city of Veracruz. Ostensibly to protect the interests of French citizens living in Mexico whose property had been illegally seized during yet another period of civil unrest, it was,

11 Economically, France, like Britain, favored strong protectionist tariffs and *l'exclusif*, which gave priority to domestic products and the importation of raw materials from foreign holdings.

in fact, a face-saving expedition orchestrated by a belligerent ambassador and condoned by an inept Quai d'Orsay.

French-Mexican relations following this “Pastry War” normalized after the successful coup of Louis Napoleon, nephew of Napoleon I. Elected to office as president in 1848, his democratic government lasted only four years, when, in an effort to maintain political control following the constitutional end of his term, Louis Napoleon seized total power and established the Second French Empire. Under Napoleon III, as he soon styled himself, France experienced her most expansionist period. With Algeria still a festering problem and growing concern over the rise of the United States, Russia, and the promise of unification in Italy and the German states, Napoleon III hoped to consolidate domestic control through foreign expansion. Moreover, despite avowed interest in maintaining peace with Britain, Napoleon III understood that her unrivaled dominion over the waves—and their associated trade routes—represented a threat to further French economic expansion. Fears of an economic slow-down prompted many economists to push for protectionist policies among current French colonies, as well as establishing further colonies in Africa and Asia.¹² The economic historian, D.K. Fieldhouse, argues that most colonies after 1815 were acquired by European powers for little or no economic or strategic value, and furthermore posits that most colonial expansion occurred because of the general impact of industrialization and the spread of already established local power.¹³ Absent pre-existing power in Africa, Asia and elsewhere, France found herself prey to the aggrandizement of local officials who wanted to increase their own influence or fortune.

12 In the United States this same sentiment was enshrined as the “glut thesis” and colonization under such rationale might be considered a kind of “glut colonialism.”

13 Fieldhouse, 180-181.

If, as Fieldhouse asserts, colonial expansion in the post-Napoleonic world happened by happenstance, or by the maneuvering of groups at the periphery of political power, one fails to understand the role the theory of colonization played in the ideologies of decision makers. Ideology often undermines the best intentions of politicians and the historians attempting to understand their actions. Operating outside the realm of “rational actions,” ideologues harness energies that are difficult to quantize. They are, nevertheless, powerful motivators. But ideologies are social constructs and require the consent of the masses to be effective. That consent can be both tacit and unconscious, or may be pursued vigorously. French colonialism developed along consciously directed lines which articulated the universal values of the French Revolution, and tacitly promoted a general understanding of French exceptionalism over foreign savages.

The Philosophy of the Railroad: Colonial Ideology and the Civilizing Mission

The French civilizing mission developed far earlier than the British equivalent, which would not reach full articulation in English until Rudyard Kipling published “The White Man's Burden.” Unlike the British notion of civilization tied inextricably to Protestant Christianity, the French concept of civilization was rooted in the French Revolution, which saw in its universal doctrines concepts of confraternity, equality and liberty.¹⁴ Moreover, because of the almost accidental nature of French colonialism, doctrine often had to fill the breach *in absentia*. That is, without a motivating force from the metropole, colonial acquisition had to be explained after a

¹⁴ Though the experience of Toussaint L'Ouverture and Haiti ought to have warned observers just how “universal” those doctrines were in practice.

colony had already been acquired. Algeria, Cochin-China, and Mexico all serve as experiments in colonial ideology.

Prefaced in terms of imperial honor, the invasion of Algeria netted France a major colonial holding which required explanation. Settler colonialism and *l'exclusif* seemed insufficient; though both Louis XIV and Napoleon I had toyed with the idea of conquering Algeria, neither wanted the onerous burden it would have entailed. That Charles X would have engaged in such an endeavor suggests his hope for a splendid little war to distract dissenters at home. But once troops were on the ground, and the army's honor depended upon glory on the battlefield, Algeria became fixed in the French imagination, so much so that it would become incorporated as a department of France—constitutionally including it into the French homeland. Ideologies of colonization arose to explain and excuse expansion in the great land just across the sea. Thus, colonial ideology became predicated on the idea that the colonies should serve the homeland. Wherever possible, they should be self-sufficient as well as provide ready markets from domestic products and the raw materials the metropole required to industrialize and compete with the likes of Britain, Spain, and eventually Russia and the United States. Moreover, colonies, it was hoped, would provide easy sources of labor and soldiers for further expansion. Between 1850 and 1914, over 150,000 laborers were recruited from colonial holdings to work the plantations of Martinique, Guyane and Guadeloupe.¹⁵ Indeed, labor became the primary export of the French Indian holdings.

When, in 1842, Louis Phillipe's chief minister, François Guizot explicated the design of French colonialism, he defined the way in which foreign policy would ultimately be decided:

15 Aldrich, 22.

I am inclined to believe, in general, that it is little befitting the policy and genius of France to essay new and great colonial establishments at a great distance from our territory and, for their sake, to engage in long struggles either against natives of these countries or against other powers. What is appropriate for France, what is indispensable, is to possess at points on the globe which are destined to become great centres of commerce, sure and strong maritime stations to serve as a support for our commerce, where the fleet can obtain provisions and find safe harbour.¹⁶

These *points d'appui* seemed the ideal colonial policy. Easily defended, they would serve as supply depots, anchorage and ports of departure for the French navy. Wary of encountering the British on the open seas, Guizot's policy left much of the world *sacrosanct*, that is, untouchable by French expansionist ambitions. This simple economic formula, however, failed to incorporate the imperial spirit of the time. And lest we forget, the spirit of the French Revolution was also a missionary spirit.¹⁷ Indeed, Felix Markham has remarked that Catholic ideology is so wrapped into the French mentality that religion and politics are inseparable, and even when they are the most anti-clerical they are still Catholic.¹⁸ The evangelical spirit of the nation expressed itself as a universalist desire to spread the Revolution; the 1848 revolution saw the same spirit reinvigorated, as France hoped to civilize her colonies, the Dark Continent, and the Orient. Missionary zeal never wavered, and expressed itself toward Mexico in unexpected ways.

Paul Leroy-Beaulieu articulated the three-fold characteristics of colonies. They were remote outposts that could serve as trading posts or supply depots; settlements, or the type of colony that is normally referred to under the settler-colonialism model; and plantation

16 Quoted in Aldrich, 94.

17 Though, as Robespierre would quip: People hate missionaries with guns.

18 Felix Markham, introduction to *Social Organization, the Science of Man, and other writings* (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), xxxi.

settlements in which a natural resource is fully exploited.¹⁹ The concept of an American southern plantation built on the labor of black slaves hardly fits French notions of equality and equality, a distressing paradox expressed by Toussaint L'Ouverture in the 1791 slave revolt of Saint Domingue which is still far from fully explained. Phrased chiefly in economic terms, Leroy-Beaulieu's definitions failed to address the missionary enclaves which France exploited to expand her interests, especially in Cochinchina, where persecution of Catholic Christians led Napoleon III to press military action against King Tu-Duc.²⁰

Mexico, already a Catholic country, seems like an impractical destination for proselytizing. The civilizing mission nevertheless found expression in a scientific and political mission. Under the aegis of the French military, and supported by geographic groups in Paris, a scientific team of 150 scholars and army officers was organized in Mexico City "in order to lift up this unknown world and deliver it from chaos!"²¹ Invoking both the Imperial legacy of the first Napoleon whose Egyptian campaign became "a sort of French tradition," and the Roman Empire, whose dominion was exemplified by her roads, bridges and aqueducts, Michel Chevalier expected that France's "flag will leave similar traces of its passage in Mexico."²² The creation of

19 Paul Leroy-Beaulieu, "Colonization Among Modern People," in *Sources of the Western Tradition, Vol II: From the Renaissance to the Present*, 5th ed., edited by Marvin Perry, Joseph R. Peden, and Theodore H. Von Laue (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2003), 254.

20 Fiedlhouse, 200. This ultimately led to the concession of three eastern provinces of Cochinchina, including Saigon, and the island of Pulo Condore.

21 Paul N. Edison, "Conquest Unrequited: French Expeditionary Science in Mexico, 1864-1867," *French Historical Studies* 26 (2003): 460.

22 Edison, 464. State-sponsored scientific expeditions had occurred in Greece after it gained independence from the Ottoman Empire and in Algeria which became a sort of "open-air laboratory."

a modern government, built on the lines of France, would assure French hegemony in the New World to check Anglo-Saxon aggression. The idea of “saving” the Latin races from oblivion resonated deeply with observers and reflected a nearly messianic vision toward Mexico.

If the reason for keeping colonies was as an engine for the economic success of the metropole, then obtaining them required a secondary rationale. The French articulated their civilizing mission according to a hierarchy of needs: political order, scientific advancement, and the civil religion expanded by the French Revolution. Since 1798 and the invasion of Egypt by Napoleon I, scientific expeditions had underscored military conquest. Accompanying the French in Algeria and in Mexico in 1861, they expressed the growing collaboration between exact sciences and industry.²³ The Saint-Simonian religion articulated the ability of technology to combat lawlessness and injustice, and colonizers appropriated the Saint-Simonian language to rationalize conquest. Indeed, Michel de Chevalier, an intimate of Napoleon III and organizer of the Mexican intervention, saw in it the “political regeneration of Mexico.”²⁴ Railways, canals, and vast expenditures of capital and technology were regarded by Chevalier and other Saint-Simonians as the panacea that would restore order to Mexico.

Napoleon III had long imagined building a canal that would bring together the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. After a short exile in the United States, where he acquired some of the

23 See Lewis Pyenson, *Civilizing Mission: Exact Sciences and French Overseas Expansion, 1830-1940* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993) for an expansive examination of the ties between the search to establish the universality of scientific laws. Indeed, after 1815 much of the scientific curiosity centered around the question of whether a law in Europe would be the same in the New World, or Africa, or the Orient. Thus scientific ends shifted from Napoleon I's anthropological census in Egypt to Napoleon III's hope to confirm existing scientific theories.

24 Michel de Chevalier, *Mexico: Ancient and Modern vol. II* trans. Thomas Alpass (London: John Maxwell and Company, 1864), 179.

fascination with the Americas he would carry later into his rule, he returned to Europe and unsuccessfully staged a *coup*. Imprisoned in the city of Ham, he spent several years pondering the grand construction; in 1846 Louis Napoleon, then only an embittered prince worried about position without authority, penned a short pamphlet explaining the economic benefits of a canal that would cross Nicaragua.²⁵ At the time he expressed himself to the British crown, explaining how a canal built with British funds would directly benefit their interests. Then without hope of attaining the French crown, Louis Napoleon requested that he be considered to rule a Latin American union. Edward Richards argues that:

[both] Louis Napoleon's declaration that position without power was 'a shameful anomaly' and his close integration of political and economic objectives reflect his frequently expressed belief that a strong, active government was a necessary prerequisite for social and economic progress. His assumption that a European ruler, supported by European capital could rapidly transform Latin America into an orderly, prosperous area strong enough to counterbalance the United States was the same that later led him into disaster in Mexico.²⁶

Underlying these basic assumptions, moreover, lays the pervasive world-view of European powers that Old World institutions could satisfy New World problems. Furthermore, the European egoism helped engender a sense of American backwardness, particularly as European observers noted the disparity between European notions of freedom and the existence of slavery in the United States. The anarchy of Mexico and the fissiparousness of South American republics lent credence to the idea that the imposition of power from a strong, centralized

25 Edward W. Richards, "Louis Napoleon and Central America," *The Journal of Modern History* 34 (1962): 178.

26 Richards, 180.

authority might be able to restore order; that this order would tend to promote financial benefit to that power was clearly taken into account.

Louis Napoleon's South American ambitions demonstrate a strong bent toward economic concerns, but once he ascended the throne and ushered in the Second Empire, his goals shifted accordingly. Catholic allegiance in France, despite marked anti-clerical moments, nevertheless demonstrates the deep imaginative pull that Catholicism had on the French mentality. As we have seen already, revolutionary zeal expressed itself in terms of missionary zeal; scientific expeditions stressed the restoration of depraved humanity; colonial apologists spoke of enlightening benighted savages; furthermore, apologists for Napoleon III saw in him the “elder son of the Church.”²⁷ Historians have tended to view religious convictions with skepticism. Certainly, not all who hewed to a particular faith were “true believers,” but to discount these beliefs as merely excuses to further political, economic or social agendas is to disregard a primary constituent of the human experience. At the very least, apologists for Napoleon III discerned in his actions a Roman Catholic revival in the New World.

Protestantism was on the rise. Northern Germany,²⁸ Britain, and the United States were strong Protestant nations; Greek Orthodoxy spread throughout the east. With family ties to the Spanish court (his wife was Spanish nobility) he hoped to expand the Latin influence in the Americas, wished to see the expansion of monarchies, and perhaps endeavored to restore Papal authority to a part of the world where it was slowly losing ground. One writer went so far as to elaborate that “[by] his intervention in Mexico, Napoleon III endeavors to arrest the decay of the

27 Itself harkening back to France as the “Eldest Daughter of the Church.”

28 Though disunited, northern German principalities nevertheless represented the threat of unification with Prussia into a German Empire, which would arise in 1871.

Romish Church in America,” and to “erect a barrier against the tide of Protestantism.”²⁹

Apologists of the time saw in the invasion of Mexico the rejuvenation of Catholic Christianity, a restoration that had clear ties to France's civilizing mission. Whether or not Napoleon III clung to his religion with the ardor that observers suggest is difficult to say. Notoriously close-lipped, he rarely discussed his motives. Both the religious fervor and influence of her wife are well known, however, and certainly observers at the time saw his actions as religiously motivated.³⁰

The French concept of the civilizing mission, therefore, was based upon a series of inter-related, and interlocking ideologies. Namely, that the uniquely French concept of civilization superseded alternative varieties; that French religious, scientific, and civil institutions possessed an ardor and inherent worth that entitled adherents to describe themselves as *bien pensants*, or as Nancy Barker describes them, men of “correct views;”³¹ and that because of this superiority French civilization not only would dominate lesser forms, but that France had the duty to expand its own civilization. These inter-related ideologies help explain the mentality which allowed the French adventure in Mexico. But a powder keg will not explode without a light. The flash in the Mexican pan was, once again, a slight to honor and an outstanding debt.

An Empire of Straw: Imperial Recognition and Economic Investment

29 “Napoleonic Idea in Mexico,” 75-76.

30 Nancy Barker describes the Empress Eugénie’s ire when the Pope refused to christen the two sons of Prince Napoleon because of the unorthodox standing of the godparents within the Church. Interceding on their behalf with the Emperor, Eugénie orchestrated the September Convention of 1864 which helped reconcile France with the Church.

31 Nancy N. Barker, “The Factor of 'Race' in the French Experience in Mexico, 1821-1861,” *Hispanic American Historical Review* 59 (1979): 1.

Michel de Chevalier describes the instigation of the intervention in Mexico as the “desire of obtaining redress for certain definite grievances, for the interest of a small number of Frenchmen.”³² From the beginning, few doubted that the French intervention evinced a desire on the part of a few influential men to redress wrongs against them, or to exploit an uncertain situation to their own financial gain. Sometimes called the Affair of the Jecker Bonds, the single event which tipped France toward war was the moment Benito Juárez, in May of 1861, declared that Mexico would cease payments on foreign debt.³³

Since independence from Spain in 1821, Mexico was a hotbed of corruption and strife. Sectional violence between monarchists and republicans, clericals and anticlericals, as well as natives and *mestizos*, produced a seething cauldron of unrest that provoked distrust and contempt from neighbors and foreign nations. A short, pointless skirmish—the above-mentioned Pastry Shop War—with the French over loss of face and the agitations of French locals left bitterness in each of their mouths. With the secession of Texas in 1835, Mexico engaged in a costly war that left her financially insolvent. The Mexican-American War reduced her territory by half, though an indemnity of \$15,000,000 helped convince foreign backers that loans in default might soon be repaid. A government *coup* in 1858 opened the door once more to war, as Conservative forces opposed the Liberal government under Benito Juárez. This War of Reforms led once more to bankruptcy; hoping to renegotiate for better terms of repayment, Juárez announced that Mexico would not repay her foreign loans. This not-uncommon declaration of insolvency by Mexico

32 Chevalier, 179.

33 Colin M. MacLachlan and William H. Beezley, *Mexico's Crucial Century, 1810-1910: An Introduction* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press), 90.

would most likely have gone unnoticed by the world at large except for the scheming of the Duke of Morny and the head of the French legation to Mexico, the Duke de Saligny. Their avarice and caprice promoted a claim by the Swiss banker Jecker to the amount of 75,000,000 francs. When Jauréz announced his government's intent not to repay his foreign loans, the Jecker bonds became worthless. When the Jecker bonds were brought to his attention through the Duke de Morny and Eugénie, Napoleon III seized upon it as an excuse to invade Mexico. A tripartite alliance between France, Spain and Britain allowed Napoleon's expedition the veneer of international approval. After landing at Veracruz in December 1861, however, Spain and Britain learned of the French plans to invest Mexico with a monarch and withdrew from the alliance. Mexican forces, despite a heroic victory at the Battle of Puebla were unable to counter French forces in fixed battles. Guerrilla forces harried the French for nearly three years; despite controlling not more than a thin strip of land connecting the important port of Veracruz and Mexico City, Napoleon III declared victory in Mexico and invited then³⁴ Archduke Maximilian to take the throne. Maximilian's arrival signaled a turning point in French policy. Costing an estimated 52,000,000 francs³⁵ and the lives of tens of thousands,³⁶ French politicians finally conceded the futility of supporting the Mexican throne. Having failed to secure French guarantees before sailing to Mexico, Maximilian was left begging for troops and support.

Napoleon III, however, had committed his forces to withdrawal by 1867, and instead urged

34 As part of a concession to his brother, Maximilian relinquished claims to the Austrian throne.

35 Bigelow, 61.

36 Most to malaria, or *el vomito*, which Chevalier lamented deprived “many brave fellows, soldiers and sailors, [the consolation] of dying on the field of battle, in the face of the enemy, in the midst of glorious conflict.” Chevalier, 178.

Maximilian to train local Indians to form militia regiments. The tenuousness of the Mexican position rapidly became apparent as Liberal forces under Benito Juárez continued to harass forces loyal to Maximilian. Eventually forced to flee, Maximilian was captured and tried. Despite appeals from Empress Eugénie, Victor Hugo and Garibaldi, Juárez forces executed Maximilian in 1867.

From this the historian finds the dedicated appeals to financial redress and the hopes of economic gain for the imperial initiator, that is, France. The French intervention arose strictly through French economic and financial concerns, despite contemporary declarations that French military honor was of paramount concern.³⁷ If, as I have supposed, an informal imperial model best explains the French intervention Mexico, then the model predicts an expansion of economic influence over neighboring countries. Indeed, French hopes prior to the establishment of Maximilian as emperor of Mexico rested in uniting Mexico, the Confederate States of America, the American west, and even the United States into a broad confederation of states. As Kathryn Hanna asserts, American reunification was considered highly doubtful, and the Mexican scheme of Napoleon III rested in the belief that this disunion would favor Maximilian.³⁸ Repeating the opinion of Count Corti—Maximilian's eminent biographer—that French opinion on American disunity had not changed by 1864, Hanna contends that much of Maximilian and Napoleon III's aspiration for the New World rested in establishing a pan-American diet similar to the German model.³⁹ Moreover, once Maximilian had arrived in Mexico he immediately established

37 Albert D. Vandam, "Personal History of the Second Empire. X. The Causes of the Mexican War" in *The North American Review* 161 (1895): 477.

38 Kathryn Abbey Hannah, "The Roles of the South in the French Intervention of Mexico," *The Journal of Southern History* 20 (1954): 9.

39 Hanna, "Roles of the South . . .", 10.

diplomatic relations with the Empire of Brazil, ruled by Pedro II, his first cousin. The Brazilian consulate, moreover, expended as many funds as the London or Washington consulate, a figure which Richard McCornack accounts for by the importance to which Maximilian attached friendly relations with the Brazilian Empire.⁴⁰ Once firmly seated on the Mexican throne Maximilian sought to extend his influence in the United States; by 1865 the United States' civil war had ended—the unthinkable rapprochement had occurred—and Maximilian was forced to treat with the United States as a unified body. The idea of a pan-American union faded and instead Maximilian undertook action to expand popular favor in the United States toward his empire. Hoping to turn the tide of public support, Maximilian sent Luis de Arroyo, an extensively experienced minister, to New York in early 1865, followed by Mariano Degollado, a former member of the Mexican legation to Washington, in July of that year. Without formal diplomatic recognition by the United States, however, Secretary of State Seward rebuffed each of their attempts to meet with him. Faced with these difficulties, Arroyo and Degollado turned to informal means to bolster support, advocating the imperial cause in French-speaking newspapers and through personal conversations with members of Congress.⁴¹ Frazer paints a picture of the general distrust of the American public for imperial schemes, and the wily conniving of Matías Romero, “Juaréz' able minister in Washington” at undermining Arroyo and Degollado from the

40 Richard Blaine McCornack, “Maximilian's Relations with Brazil,” in *The Hispanic American Historical Review* 32 (1952): 177.

41 Robert W. Frazer, “Maximilian's Propaganda Activities in the United States, 1865-1866,” in *The Hispanic American Historical Review* 24 (1944): 8.

start.⁴² Despite these set-backs, however, they evidence not only Maximilian's desire to influence American opinion, but his attempt to manipulate political and economic concerns for his benefit.

Hoping to build commercial ties with the United States, Maximilian sent his friend Count Ollivier Rességuier, a former Austrian naval officer, to “promote ventures of every sort that would call for the investment of large sums of money” into Mexican capital ventures.⁴³ Little came of these machinations except a nine-year concession to Eugene de Courcillon to establish the Imperial Mexican Express Company to “transport mail, merchandise, and passengers between the United States and Mexico, foster immigration and colonization, and engage in banking and exchange.”⁴⁴ The plan was undercut by the plotting of Romero, as well as a minor scandal involving Secretary of State Seward's nephew, a secretary in the concern. Though unsuccessful in the long run, and in the opinion of Frazer,⁴⁵ more damaging to Maximilian than beneficial, the Imperial Mexican Express Company nevertheless demonstrates the concerted effort on the part of Maximilian and his ministers to expand influence into the United States through economic and financial means.

A Skein Drawn Taut: Conclusions

42 Frazer, 7.

43 Frazer, 10-11.

44 Frazer, 11.

45 Frazer, 11.

Historical fact ultimately boils down to the necessity of drawing lines of inference from an abundance of sources without a clear connection. In the case of the French intervention in Mexico, the historical fact lies in a series of numbers. In December of 1861 France invaded Mexico. Some men died, others prospered and though the nameless dead certainly possessed the same vigor and love of life that anyone reading this paper possesses, they nevertheless remain faceless and forgotten. The reality of a historical moment is sometimes forgotten just as their names have been, and we are left to ponder the sequence of events and try to explain how they came about, instead of unburying the narratives and experiences of men and women who ultimately cannot be known. Therein lays the paradox of historical narrative and part of the dilemma of producing history. In claiming to examine the truth of an event, of relating things “as they were” we nevertheless perpetuate a fiction in that, even in the span of a single human life, no narrative can truly capture the breadth and depth, the triumphs and follies, of human experience. Instead, we hope that the bare facts summarize and encapsulate an event sufficiently enough to offer knowledge and impart wisdom.

The French intervention is an under-appreciated window into the lives and mentalities of individuals and nations, in that it examines the caprice and avarice of negligent officials, as well as the heroic lengths to which patriots and ideologues will go to secure their beliefs. The Duke de Saligny, the Duke de Morny, the Emperor Napoleon III, Matías Romero and Benito Juárez each operated for their own reasons, noble and ignoble alike, yet as historical actors are as embedded in their environment as the historian that would examine them. As Hegel demonstrated, to know them is impossible; the past truly is a foreign country and no matter how well you speak the language you will always be a foreigner. Nevertheless, a historian studies

that country with all the vigor of a geographer, hoping that in examining all the subtle and multitudinous differences, the similarities of human experience will become all the more evident.

Ultimately, notions of informal empire, colonialism, even history itself, are ways to frame human experience, encapsulating it in neat little boxes for easy consumption. But they offer ways in which contemporaneous readers can examine their own experience, to find what resembles their own life and ponder the meaning of the differences. Informal empire explains relationships between human beings and their institutions; the associations which we all form shift, break, and re-attach in unpredictable ways, yet theories such as these help explain the fractures and sutures of self-imagined communities.

When Napoleon III invaded Mexico in 1861 he could hardly have imagined that historians would examine his actions in the light of theories propounded well over a century later; moreover, his intentions are entirely his own, inscrutable to us. Yet fitting his actions, and the actions of his ministers, his wife, and men across the Ocean in a distant land, into the mold of informal empire helps us understand the way in which missionary zeal and the desire to make the world a better place can sometimes be misappropriated toward colonial ends. Colonialism is, in the final analysis, a system of oppression and violence enacted by a greater power upon a weaker; informal empire is bullying by a more scholarly name. That the bully believes that he is actually in the right matters little to the one being bullied. It contains the same relationship of violence and coercion and ultimately denies the humanity of one being bullied. France abrogated Mexican autonomy, a right espoused by the United States in Lincoln's disinterested stance;⁴⁶ the joint confusion of Napoleon III and Maximilian to why the Mexican population

46 Despite imperial designs on Mexico, Lincoln doubted the United States would ever pursue further adventures in Mexico.

refused their sovereignty demonstrates the absolute disregard each evinced toward their subjects. Moreover, the insidiousness of republican ideology had seeped deeply into the Mexican mentality, so that by the time of the French intervention, the Mexican race which Empress Eugénie claimed were “at bottom, [. . .] the same as the Spanish race,”⁴⁷ were no longer the same as those ruled by her Orléanist cousins, and thus no longer scrutable by European institutions.⁴⁸

By examining the French Intervention in Mexico in light of long-standing colonial trends, what Marc Bloch calls the *longue durée*, historians are better able to disengage the events from simple explanations of balance of power or economic analyses. Ideology, colonial trends, and the influence of foreign powers push historical actors toward ends which, if not inevitable, are perhaps difficult to avoid. Society, which the French historian Fernand Braudel calls a “set of sets,” is comprised of social hierarchies operating at the same time, provoking outcomes which are not easily identified and difficult to examine. Just as many ripples produce complex waves, historical actors introduce complex interactions on the historical stage; but by analyzing each wave individually, historians can better understand the ways in which they interact, and ultimately, the overall froth of human activity. The informal imperial model offers a way of understanding these complex interactions by isolating one unique “set” and placing it in dialogue with many others.

47 Eugénie to Charlotte, Tuileries, April 1, 1865, quoted in Barker, *Distaff Diplomacy*, 131.

48 Racial concepts at this time understood what we would call ethnicities or cultures as distinct “races” which operated according to quantifiable laws. After centuries of Spanish rule, European observers saw in Mexico a homogenous population operating along similar cultural rules as Spaniards. In effect, Mexicans were expected to act just as Spaniards, and both the Spanish and French monarchs believed they understood the temperament of the Spanish people. Thus the unswerving faith Napoleon III and Maximilian placed on popular Mexican support.

French colonial endeavors operated among many competing desires, but operated along a broad trend. The piecemeal acquisition of colonies created a situation in which French intellectuals were forced to create a coherent ideology not only of acquisition but of colonization. As that ideology was adopted and modified, it created a system wherein subsequent acquisition was not only permitted but enjoined. This tacit approval allowed additional ideologies to articulate themselves along colonial lines: A civilizing mission, the revivification of monarchy in the New World, protection of Catholic interests in the Americas. Each of these ideologies then expanded the other, until a coherent body of colonial ideology crystalized into support for territorial acquisition. Nevertheless, practical concerns necessitated the use of indirect imperial methods. Simply put, expense and distance prevented movements of troops across the Atlantic. French colonialism required the appropriation of home-grown support in Mexico, as well as the manipulation of monarchical desires in Maximilian. Maximilian's success largely lay in the success of French commercial interests in Mexico. His inability to pacify the region and create a *Pax Mexicana* in which commerce could thrive led to the withdrawal of French monetary and military support.

Thus, without understanding the complex economic, ideological and military goals expressed in informal imperialism, the French intervention remains a mystery best explained by balance of power politics. The rationality of the latter, however, undermines its own position, as Napoleon III acted irrationally from the perspective of simple military economics. Despite an effective Mexican lobby⁴⁹ in the French court, observers and analysts of the time understood that conquering Mexico was doomed to failure. A rational actor would not have interceded. Informal imperialism offers us the benefit of including several competing factors, some of which do not

49 If I can borrow the term.

seem complementary on the face of it. But when examined in conjunction, offer the simplest explanation for French involvement in Mexico.

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