One of the first cultural accounts of citizenship in Latin America was Roberto da Matta’s (1979) effort to understand the specificity of Brazilian national culture. Da Matta identified the coexistence of two broad discourses in Brazilian urban society, calling them the discourse of the home and the discourse of the street.¹ He described “of the home” discourse as a hierarchical and familial register, where the subjects are “persons” in the Maussian sense—that is, they assume specific, differentiated, and complementary social roles. The discourse “of the street,” by contrast, is the discourse of liberal citizenship: Subjects are individuals who are meant to be equal to one another and equal before the law.

The interesting twist in da Matta’s analysis regards the relationship between these two discourses, a relationship that he synthesizes with the Brazilian adage that says “for my friends, everything; for my enemies, the law.”² For da Matta, Brazilian society can be described as having “citizenship” as a degraded baseline, or zero degree, of relationship, a fact that is visible in the day-to-day management of social relations.

Specifically, da Matta focuses on an urban ritual that he called the Voçe sabe com quem esta falando? (Do you know who you are talking to?), a phrase used to

I am grateful to Carlos Forment for his help with sources on nineteenth-century patriotic speeches. I also wish to thank the students in my History of the Public Sphere in Latin America seminar at the University of Chicago, where I developed this essay, and Dilip Gaonkar for his encouragement.
interrupt the universal application of a rule—that is, to interrupt what he calls the discourse of the street—in order to gain exceptional status and to rise above the degradation reserved for all nobodies. So, for instance, a lady cuts in line to enter a parking lot; the attendant protests and points to the line, but she says “Do you know who you are talking to? I am the wife of so and so, member of the cabinet,” and so on.

A similar dynamic has characterized modern Mexican citizenship. For instance, it has long been noted that in Mexico much of the censorship of the press has been “self-censorship” rather than direct governmental censorship. Speaking to a journalist about this phenomenon, da Matta remarked that much of this self-censorship resulted from the fact that journalists, like all members of Mexican middle classes, depend to an unpredictable degree on their social relations. Reliance on personal relations generates a kind of sociability that avoids open attacks, except when corporate interests are involved. Thus, the censorship of the press is in part also a product of the dynamics of da Matta’s degraded citizenship.

The logic that da Matta outlined for understanding the degradation of Brazilian citizenship could easily be used to guide an ethnography of civic culture and sociability in Mexico. The ease of application stems from similarities at both the cultural and structural levels: Familial idioms used to shape a “discourse of the home” have common Iberian elements in these two countries, due to related concepts and ideas of family and friendship, as well as to similar colonial discourses for the social whole.

In this essay I develop a historical discussion of the cultural dynamics of Mexican citizenship. I begin with a series of vignettes that explore what the application of da Matta’s perspective to Mexico might reveal. I argue that the notion that citizenship is the baseline, or zero degree, of relationship needs to be complemented by a historical view of changes in the definition and political situation of


2. The same saying exists in Mexico and has been attributed to none other than Benito Juárez, Mexico’s most famous liberal. See Fernando Escalante Gonzalbo, *Ciudadanos imaginarios: Memorial de los afanes y desventuras de la virtud, y apologia del vicio triunfante en la Republica Mexicana—tratado de moral publica* (Mexico City: Centro de Estudios Sociologicos, Colegio de Mexico, 1992).

citizenship. Without such a perspective on the changing definition of citizenship, a critical aspect of the politics of citizenship is lost. The bulk of this article is devoted to interpreting the dynamics of citizenship in modern Mexico, as it developed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The conclusion argues against narratives of Mexican modernity that tell contemporary history as a simple “transition to democracy.”

Cultural Logic and History

Mexico City is a place of elaborate politeness, a quality epitomized by the people whose job is to mediate (for instance, secretaries and waiters) but also generally visible in the socialization of children and in the existence of elaborate registers of obsequiousness, attentiveness, and respect. All of these registers disappear in the anonymity of the crowd, however, where people will push, pull, shove, pinch, and cut in front of you. There is no social contract for the crowd; there are only gentlemen’s pacts among persons. For instance, drivers in Mexico City tend to drive with their eyes pointed straight ahead and cast slightly downward, much like a waiter’s. This way they need not make concessions and can drive by presocial Hobbesian rules: Don’t give away an inch. If one’s eye wanders even a little, it might catch another driver’s eye, and that driver will gently and smilingly ask to be let into the flow of traffic. At this point, the world of personal relations often takes hold of the driver who had been trying to keep things anonymous, and he may gallantly let the other car through.

This dynamic contrasts with the culture of societies who have strong civic traditions, wherein citizenship is the place in which the social pact is manifested (England, for instance, where forming a queue is a sacrosanct rite of citizenship), but where personal relationships do not extend as far out. Thus, a British traveler to Mexico may be scandalized at the greedy and impolitic attitudes of the people on the street, whereas a Mexican will complain that no pleas or personal interjections were ever able to move an English bureaucrat to sympathy.

What are the mechanisms of socialization into this form of courtesy? Access to an alleged right or to a service in Mexico is very often not universal. Education, for instance, is meant to be available to all, but it is often difficult to register a child in a nearby school or to get him or her into a school at all. Public medicine exists, but it is always insufficient. Moving across the Mexico City traffic in an orderly fashion is often made difficult by the overuse of public space. In short, Mexico has never had a state that was strong enough to provide services universally. In this context, corruption and other market mechanisms easily emerge as selection
criteria: If you pay money, the bureaucrat will see you first. The system has also generated forms of sociability that help shape a practical orientation that is well suited to the discretionary power that scarcity gives to bureaucrats and other gatekeepers.

One notable example of this is summed up in the very Mexican proverb that says “He who gets angry, loses” (el que se enoja, pierde). According to this principle, the wise person never explodes out of exasperation, because he or she can only lose by such an ex-abrupto. A service provider will only clam up when faced with an angry user and, since the service is a scarce resource, he or she will use politeness as a selection criterion.

Socialization into politeness, patience, and self-censorship thus has at least two significant social conditions. The first is a strong reliance on personal relations to activate, operate, and rely on any bureaucratic apparatus; the second is the reliance on personal relations to achieve positions in society. Both of these conditions would therefore appear to support da Matta’s claim that citizenship is the zero-degree of relationship.

A difficulty is exposed by focusing closely on the implications of the saying “for my friends, everything; for my enemies, the law,” however (see fig. 1). The saying is clearly a model for political action, yet it contains significant ambiguities in the proposed categories (“friends,” “enemies,” “the law,” and “everything”), particularly if the saying is a recipe for a bureaucrat or a member of the political class—the “gatekeeper.” Usually a bureaucrat does not deal with personal friends or personal enemies but with people to whom he or she is initially unrelated and indifferent. Some of these people will not receive the full service that the gatekeeper controls, while others will. Thus, an initially undifferentiated public gets shaped into “friends” and “enemies.” “Everything” includes money (bribes) and prior personal connections—two routes to receiving exceptional treatment (as “friends”), and patience and politeness may at least keep...
you in the game. A breach of politeness or a burst of anger will in all likelihood place you in the “enemy” camp. The application of “the law” to differentiate the two is simply the use of bureaucratic procedure as a fundamental mechanism of exclusion.

We have, then, a logic that favors the development of personal relations, the elaboration of forms of obsequiousness and politeness, the cultural routinization of bribery, and the use of bureaucratic rules and procedure as mechanisms of exclusion. This logic is undergirded by structural conditions, of which I have stressed two—a relatively weak state and a large, poor population. Since these conditions have existed throughout Mexican history, one might expect that bribery, politeness, and a highly developed system of informal relationships have been equally constant practices and that they have been elaborated according to cultural idioms that apply a “discourse of the home” in order to create distinctions between potential users of a service. This is true at a general level.

However, while the cultural logic that I have outlined shows that citizenship is a degraded category, a “zero degree” of relationship, it also gives a false sense of continuity and constancy. I noted in the preceding discussion that the category of “friends” and “enemies” can be constructed in the process of applying a bureaucratic rule and that most of the population classified in these ways is initially indifferent to the bureaucrat. As a result, the definition of the pool that the bureaucrat is acting on is not determined by the cultural logic of social distance from the bureaucrat or gatekeeper. In other words, the gatekeeper is not actually ruling over a preselected group of friends and enemies but is instead culturally constructing “friends” and “enemies” out of a pool of people who are preselected not by him but by their theoretical relationship to a right.

As a result, although it is correct to say that—given a bureaucrat, a set of rules, and a pool of citizens—citizenship shall be the zero degree of relationship that needs to be complemented either by a prior personal claim, by a bribe, or by sympathy, the baseline of citizenship is not determined by this cultural logic, and it varies historically in important ways. These variations are not trivial, since they define the potential pool of users of a service that is being offered, an issue that also has critical significance for a long-standing history of the cultural forms of sociability that bear a connection to citizenship. A comprehensive view of modern Mexican citizenship therefore requires an interpretation of the relationship between legal and institutional definitions of citizenship and its cultural elaboration in social interaction. I shall attempt to sketch key elements of such a comprehensive view here.
Early Republicanism and the Rise of the Ideal Citizen

The debates of Mexico’s Junta Instituyente between Independence (1821) and the publication of the first Federal Constitution (1824) gave little sustained attention to citizenship. Laws governing who was a Mexican national and who was a Mexican citizen were vaguely inclusive, with attention lavished only on the question of patriotic inclusion/exclusion and with very little said about the qualities and characteristics of the citizen. Nevertheless, the process of independence had a critical role in shaping a field for a politics of citizenship.

So, for instance, in 1810 Miguel Hidalgo, the father of Mexican Independence, proclaimed the emancipation of slaves, the end to all forms of tribute and taxation levied against Indians and “castes,” and the end of certain guild monopolies. Although Hidalgo’s revolt failed, his move to create a broad base for citizenship and to level differences between castes was preserved by leaders of subsequent movements. For example, Ignacio López Rayón’s (also failed) attempt at a Mexican constitution (1811) abolished slavery (art. 24) and stated that “whoever is to be born after the happy independence of our nation will find no obstacle other than his personal defects. No opposition can stem from the class of his lineage; the same shall be observed with regard to those that represent the rank of Captain and above, or that render any special service to the country” (art. 25). The only fundamental exclusionary clause in this constitution, as in all early Mexican constitutions until that of 1857, regards the role of religion: “Catholic Religion shall be the only one, with no tolerance for any other” (art. 1).

In addition to a common movement to broaden the base of citizenship such that lineage and race were abolished as (explicit) criteria of inclusion or exclusion, early proclamations and constitutions did tend to specify that only Mexicans—and often only Mexicans who had not betrayed the nation—could hold public positions (arts. 27 and 28 of López’s constitutional project). Thus, from the very beginning the idea was to create an ample citizenry and a social hierarchy based on merit: “The American people, forgotten by some, pitied by others, and disdained by the majority, shall appear with the splendor and dignity that it has earned through the unique fashion in which it has broken the chains of despotism. Cowardice and slothfulness shall be the only causes of infamy for the citi-

5. López’s constitution can be found in Tena, Leyes fundamentales, 24–27.
6. These strictures are repeated by Morelos in his Sentimientos de la nación (1813): “Article 9. “All [public] jobs shall only be obtained by Americans” (quoted in Tena, Leyes fundamentales, 29–31).
zen, and the temple of honor shall open its doors indiscriminately to merit and virtue” (art. 38).7

Despite the general identification between early Mexican nationalism and the extension of citizenship rights in such a way as to include (former) slaves, Indians, and castes, there were a number of ambiguities and differences regarding the meaning of this extension. So, for instance, article 16 of the Mexican Empire’s first provisional legal code states, tellingly, that “the various classes of the state shall be preserved with their respective distinction, but without prejudice to public employment, which is common to all citizens. Virtues, services, talents and capability are the only medium for achieving public employment of any kind.”8

By contrast, the Federal Constitution of 1824 does not even specify who is to be considered a citizen. Instead, it leaves to the individual states the definition of who shall be allowed to vote for their representatives in Congress (art. 9), while the selection of the president and vice-president was left to Congress. Thus citizenship was to be determined by regional elites in conjunction with whomsoever they felt they needed to pay attention to, and access to federal power was mediated by a congress that represented these citizens.

It is worth noting that most of the distinctions between who was a Mexican citizen and who was merely a Mexican national are similar to the formulation found in the Spanish liberal constitution that was promulgated in Cadiz in 1812. Some of the early independent constitutions are a bit harsher than that of Cadiz on matters of religion (e.g. Father José María Morelos’s Apatzingan constitution of 1814 sanctioned the Holy Office—that is, the Inquisition—and in article 15 it upheld heresy and apostasy as crimes punishable by loss of citizenship). In one matter, however, the constitution of Cadiz narrows citizenship beyond what is explicit in the earliest Mexican constitutions: Debtors, domestic servants, vagrants, the unemployed, and the illiterate all forfeited their rights as citizens (art. 25). This move was not explicitly embraced in the first Mexican constitutional projects, but neither was it entirely avoided. Agustine de Iturbide’s Plan de Iguala, which was the first effective political charter of Independent Mexico, specified that until a constitution was formed, Mexico would operate according to the laws of the Spanish Cortes. The Federalist Constitution of 1824 left the door open for these mechanisms of exclusion by delegating the decision regarding who would be a citizen to the individual states. Finally, the Centralist and conservative constitution of 1836 reasserted the points of exclusion of Cadiz: The

7. Tena, Leyes fundamentales, 27.
8. Tena, Leyes fundamentales, 27.
rights of citizenship were suspended for all minors, domestic servants, criminals, and illiterates; they were lost definitively to all traitors and debtors to the public coffers. All citizens had to have an annual income of 100 pesos, and substantially more if they wanted to be elected to office.

In short, early Mexican constitutions were involved in a double move: the elimination of criteria of caste and of slavery in order to create a broadly based nationality that included all people who were born in Mexico or who resided in the country, were members of the Catholic Church, and were willing to follow Mexico’s laws; and the restriction of access to public office and to the public sphere to independent male property holders who could read and write. The category “citizen” was (and still is) not identical to that of “national” in legal discourse, though the two were tellingly conflated in political discourse. In fact, the relationship between the two was one of hierarchical encompassment. The Mexican citizen had the capacity to encompass Mexican nationals and to represent the whole of the nation in public.

**Inclusion and Exclusion in the Era of National Vulnerability**

At first glance, these early citizenship laws developed in a contested field in which the pressure to broaden the basis of citizenship coexisted with pressures to maintain political control in the hands of local notables.

Historian François-Xavier Guerra has argued that the urban patricians who had controlled the bureaucratic apparatus during the colonial period usually kept control over government despite these changes, relying on their power to manipulate local election processes. However, Florencia E. Mallon has also shown that in the unstable context of mid-nineteenth-century Mexico, the need to mobilize popular constituencies, and the space that was available for spontaneous popular mobilization, led to the development of forms of liberalism and conservativism that catered to these popular groups. It was, in part, the tensions that universal citizenship at times created for these local patricians and chieftains that fanned the development of a negative discourse about “the masses” in nineteenth-century Mexico: *la chusma, el populacho, la canalla, la plebe*, and other epithets portrayed masses as both dangerous and insufficiently civilized to manage political life.

Alongside these damning images of the plebe, a series of positive words referred

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to popular classes who were seen as ordered and civilized: *el pueblo, los ciudadanos, la gente buena*, and so on. To a large degree, the difference between positive and negative portrayals of the pueblo corresponded to whether the people in question were acting as dependents or whether they were difficult to control. Like the difference between the lumpen-proletariat and the proletariat, the distinction between a *canalla* and a *ciudadano* was that the latter either was a notable, or at least depended on the same system as the notables who made the distinction, while the former had only loose connections of dependency to “good society.”

So, for instance, in political speeches of the nineteenth century there are differences drawn between a lower class that may be described as “abject” and as an obstacle to progress, but that is also perceived as unthreatening and in need of state protection, and another lower class that is potentially or in fact violent and dangerous to civilization.

In a chronicle of his voyage to the United States published in 1834, Lorenzo de Zavala, a liberal from Yucatan who had been governor of the State of Mexico, a congressman, and an apologist for the U.S. colonization of Texas, tells his readers:

> Compare the moral condition of the people of the United States with that of one or two or our [federated] states and you will understand the true reason why it is impossible for us to raise our institutions to the level of our neighbor’s, especially in certain states. In the State of Mexico and in that of Yucatan, which are the ones that I know best, of the million and two hundred thousand inhabitants of the former and the seven hundred thousand inhabitants of the latter, there is a proportion of, at the most, one in twenty [who know how to read and write]. [Of these] two fifths do not know arithmetic, three fifths do not even know the meaning of the words geography, history, astronomy, etc., and four fifths do not know what the Bible is. . . . To this we must add that at least one third of the inhabitants of Yucatan do not speak Spanish, and one fifth of the State of Mexico is in the same condition. Those who do not take into account the degree of civilization of the masses when they make institutions for the people are either highly ignorant or extremely perverse [his emphasis].

Thus, the native population in particular was at the bottom of the heap and in need of elevation. A similar sentiment is echoed three decades later, after the

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French Intervention, when the 1857 Constitution was reinstated. There, in a session in Congress, representative Julio Zárate presented a proposal to prohibit private jails in haciendas and, more generally, to outlaw all punishment that was meted out in these private institutions. He described the conditions of the Indian in the following terms:

In the states of Mexico, Puebla, Tlaxcalla, Guerrero and Queretaro, where the bulk of the indigenous population is concentrated, there is slavery, there is abjection, there is misery sustained by the great landowners. And this abject condition comprises close to four million men.

It has been eleven years since the Constitution was ratified: private trials were prohibited, flogging and other degrading punishments were abolished; and authorities were given the right to establish jails for crimes . . . nonetheless, there are jails in the haciendas and stocks where the workers are sunk, and the Foreman gives lashes to the Indians, and debts are passed from father to son creating slavery, a succession of sold generations (15 February 1868).12

This view of the proto-citizen who needed to be elevated to true citizenship through state protection, miscegenation, or education, and whose condition was abject but not directly threatening to true and effective citizens contrasts with other portrayals of popular folk who are more difficult to redeem and more menacing. I shall offer two examples from the same congressional sessions that I have just cited.

On 9 January 1868 representative Jesús López brought to Congress a proposed law to banish bullfighting. This initiative was one of several attempts to isolate the causes of incivility and to transform the habits of a people who would not conform to the ideal of citizenship that the constitution granted them:

The benefits of a democratic constitution, which raise the Mexican from the condition of slavery to the rank of the citizen, announce that Mexico marches toward greatness under the auspices of liberty. In contrast to this, as an obstacle that blocks Mexico’s march toward prosperity, there exists in each community a place that symbolizes barbarism. . . .

If we descend, sir, from these philosophical and moral considerations to search for material transcendental evils in society, we shall be confronted by the degradation of that class that, because of its ignorance, is called the lowliest class [clase ínfima], and that has been indelibly inocu-

lated with a propensity to bloody acts. . . . This class, which has been dis-
inherited from the benefits of illustration, does not know the goodness of virtue except by the harm it receives for being criminal; in it the noble sentiments that inhere in the human heart degenerate, because the govern-
ment and the clergy, publicists and speakers, try to show them in abstract the matters of religion and of politics that their uncultivated intelligence cannot comprehend. All the while, the attractions of vice and the emo-
tions that are produced by certain spectacles excite and move their pas-
sions. Since it is not possible to establish schools everywhere where this class can be well taught, remove at least those other [schools] where they learn evil, where the sight of blood easily fosters the savage instincts to which they have, by nature, a propensity. If we want good citizens, if we want brave soldiers who are animated in combat and humane in triumph, prohibit spectacles that inflate sentiments and that dull [embrutecen] reason.13

Readers would be incorrect, too, to think that the dangerous “lowliest” classes that are referred to here are strictly urban and that all rural Indians were thought to be safe for state or hacendado patronage. Rebellious Indians, usually labeled “savages,” were highly dangerous. So, for instance, in his 1868 campaign against Indian rebels and a few remaining pro–Hapsburg Imperialists in Yucatan, President Juárez asked Congress to suspend a series of individual guarantees in Yuca-
tan in order to carry out a military expedition there. One of the suspended rights was article 5 of the Constitution, which reads, “No one can be forced to render personal services without a fair retribution and without their full consent. The law cannot authorize any contract that has as its object the loss or irrevocable sacrifice of a man’s liberty.” In other words, slavery and corvée labor were author-
ized for the duration of the Yucatecan campaign, which was fought principally against the Indians.14

Thus a discourse of the sort that da Matta called “discourse of the street,” that is, an egalitarian and universalistic discourse of citizenship, could be applied to the “good pueblo.” At the same time, the fact that in some nineteenth-century

14. The discussion occurs on 28 December 1867 (see Tovar, Historia parlamentaria, 122). In a related discussion a few days later, representative Zarco justifies the war in Yucatan by explaining that “From the days of Maximilian, it is well known that there were designs to create a viceroyalty in Yucatan, an asylum for reactionaries. These traitors toil to separate that territory from the republic and to instate it as a principality so that they can sell the Indians off as slaves” (quoted in Tovar, Historia parlamentaria, 137). Interestingly, in order to combat these reactionaries and the Maya rebels, Juárez and his liberals essentially legalized corvée labor and slavery in the peninsula.
constitutions servants were not allowed to vote because they were dependents and therefore did not have control over their will was indicative of the fact that most of the good pueblo was made up of a kind of citizenry that was guarded not so much by the constitutional rights of individuals as by the claims that loyalty and dependency had on the conscience of Christian patriarchs.

Nevertheless, the image of a good pueblo was not simply that of the dependent masses, since this could be thought of either as a harmonious and progressive arrangement or (as we have seen) as a form of abject slavery. In order to comprehend ideological dynamics within this field better, two new elements need to be introduced: The first is the nation’s position in a world of competing predatory powers, and the second is the question of national unity.

A sharp consciousness of national decline and of uncontrollable dangers for the nation can be found among Mexican political men almost from the time of the toppling of Iturbide (1822). References to decline and to danger abound both in the press and in discussions in Congress. So, for instance, deputy Hernández Chico claimed that the nation’s situation was “deplorable” due to lack of public funds (14 June 1824). On 12 June of that same year, deputy Cañedo warned of the need to guard against a full civil war, in light of secessionist movements in the state of Jalisco. The image of the Republic being split apart by rival factions is almost always seen as the cause of this decline or imminent disaster, as in the case of a speech read in Congress by the minister of war against a pro-Iturbide uprising in Jalisco on 8 June 1824: “Yes sir, there are vehement indications that these two generals are plotting against the republic, that they desire its ruin, that it is they who move those implacable assassins that afflict the states of Puebla and Mexico; they who propagate that deadly division, that confrontation between parties, it is they who are behind the conspirators who cause our unease and who make life so difficult.”

This feeling of pending or actual disaster caused by lack of union increased and became all pervasive in political discourse as the country indeed became unstable, economically ruinous, and subject to a number of humiliations by foreign powers.

In a remarkably frank, if not entirely extraordinary, “Civic Oration” proffered on the anniversary of Independence in the city of Durango in 1841, Licenciado

15. All citations of discussions of the First Constitutional Congress are from the facsimile edition, Actas constitucionales mexicanas (1821–1824), 10 vols. (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1980). Dates of discussion will be cited rather than pagination, which is not entirely sequential.

16. Minister of War, Actas constitucionales, 8 June 1824.
Jesus Arellano recapped the history of political divisions and fraternal struggle in the following terms:

Let’s go back in time to September 27, 1821 [the day Independence was achieved]. . . . That day, my fellow citizens, the very day of our greatest fortune, also initiates the era of our greatest woes. It is from that day that a horrible discord began to exert its deadly influence. Unleashed from the abysmal depths where it resides, it flung itself furiously in the midst of our newly born society and destroyed it in its crib. . . . There in the shadows of that frightful darkness we can hear the roar of the monster that spilled in Padilla the blood of general Iturbide: the blood of the hero who finished the work of Hidalgo and Morelos. There, too, you can hear the horrible cry of that malicious and treacherous spirit that sold the life of the great (benemérito) and innocent general Guerrero to the firing squad. 17

The heroes who had initiated the Revolution—Hidalgo, Allende, Aldama, Morelos—had all been martyred by Spaniards, but the two who actually achieved Independence—Iturbide and Guerrero—were both murdered by factious Mexicans. This was to stand symbolically in a position analogous to Original Sin, wherein Mexicans are denied their entry to National Happiness because of their internal vices and divisions: “Woe is you, unfortunate Mexico! Woe is you because not having yet fully entered the age of infancy, you decline in a precocious decrepitude that brings you close to the grave! Woe is you because you are like the female of those venomous insects that thrive in our climate, and of whom it is said that it gives birth to its children only to be eaten by them!” 18 Decline was caused by personal ambition and folly among leaders and would-be leaders of government, so much so that Arellano begins his remarkable speech distancing himself from any sort of political activity: “I have not yet traveled—and God spare me from ever taking—the murky paths of the politics that dominate us; of that science whose principles are the whim of those who profess it, where the most obvious truths are put in doubt, and where he who is best at cheating and who is best at disguising his deceptions is considered wise. 19

The ultimate results of vice, selfishness, and ambition have been the ruination of Mexico, its decline, its inability to reap the benefits of freedom and indepen-

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17. Oración cívica que en el aniversario del grito de independencia se pronunció en el palacio de gobierno de Durango el 16 de septiembre de 1841 por el Lic. Jesus Arellano (Colección Lafragua, Biblioteca Nacional, Mexico City). Hereafter Arellano, “Civic Oration.”
18. Arellano, “Civic Oration,” 11. Curiously, the scorpion would later go on to become emblematic of the state of Durango.
dence. For some speakers, these vices were typical of one party: monarchical interests of conservatives, for instance; or Catholic fanaticism that led to blocking the doors to colonization from northern Europe and the United States; or to Federalist folly in delegating too much power and autonomy to states. For all, they reflected a lack of virtue and the fall of public morality. To quote again from Arellano: “We must acknowledge that our vices have grown and that public morality is every day extenuated, that our country has been a constant prey of ambition, of jealousy, of fratricidal tendencies, of atrocious vendettas, of insatiable usury, of fanaticism and superstition, of ineptitude and perversity, and of clumsy and inhumane mandarins.”20

In synthesis, it is mistaken to imagine that in its origins the discourse of citizenship was in any simple way about settling a “zero degree of relationship.” On the contrary, early legal codes had quite significant strictures regarding who could be a citizen. These restrictions readily allowed for the emergence of one specific discourse about the good and the bad pueblo: Good pueblo was the pueblo that was obedient, the portion of Mexican nationals who allowed themselves peacefully to be represented by Mexican citizens; bad pueblo was the pueblo that was not governed by the class of local notables, and this included rebellious Indians (like those cited in Yucatan or in Durango) as much as the feared clases ínfimas that were not assimilable through public education.

At the same time, the tendency to conflate nationality and citizenship, at least as a utopian idea, existed from the very beginning, and this allowed for another kind of distinction between good and bad citizens. This distinction focused on the “petty tyrants.” Some of these were perceived, particularly after the Constitution of 1857 as local caciques or hacendados who kept Indians in a slavelike position and away from their individual rights as Mexicans and as citizens, as was the case in the speech, cited earlier, against jails in haciendas. Others, and this was particularly prevalent in the earlier period, were tyrants in their selfish appropriation of what was public.

This latter form of dividing between virtuous and vicious elites readily allowed for the consolidation of a discourse of messianism around a virtuous caudillo, as is illustrated in another patriotic speech, pronounced on 11 September 1842 (anniversary of the triumph against the Spanish invasion of 1829) in the city of Orizaba: “The political regeneration of Anahuac [Mexico] was reserved ab initio to a singular Veracruzano: an entrepreneurial genius, an animated soldier, a keen statesman, a profound politician or, in sum, to Santa Anna the great, who like

another Alcides and Tesco, will purify the precious ground of the Aztecs and rid it of that disgusting and criminal riffraff (canalla) of tyrants of all species and conditions.”

In short, the political field around the definition of citizenship involved three kinds of distinctions: one between a pueblo that would be encompassed by a group of notables and a pueblo that would not; another between selfish and false citizens who sought private gain from their public position as citizens and those who equated citizenship to public service and sacrifice; and a third between citizens who strove to open the way for the extension of citizenship rights and those who strove to block them in order to enhance their own petty-tyrannical authority.

In some contexts, these views could be articulated to one another. For example, the situation of the bad pueblo was compared to that of a young woman who was not under the tutelage of a man—it was fodder for “seduction” by bandits or by factious aspiring politicians. The bad pueblo was fodder for the vicious politician, as much as it was the principal challenge for enlightened liberal governments that sought to expand public education, eliminate the obscurantist influence of the Church, and prohibit bullfights, cockfights, and other forms of barbaric diversions.

The description of citizenship as a zero degree of relationship, then, is misleading from the very entry of Mexico to modernity because it emphasizes only one aspect of the phenomenon, which is the fact that familial discourses have always been used to supersede the universalism of the legal order. Moreover, the notion of the citizen as the baseline of all political relationships is historically incorrect, since in the early national period it was clearly a sign of distinction to be a citizen, and even after the Constitution of 1857 and the Revolutionary Constitution of 1917, it still excluded minors and women. Having established this general point, let us return to our evolutionary panorama of the development of citizenship in Mexico.

**The Demise of Early Liberal Citizenship**

The first truly liberal constitution of Mexico (1857) develops an inclusive and relatively unproblematic identification between citizenship and nationality: To be a citizen, all you need is to be a Mexican over 18 (if you are married; over 21 if you are not) and to earn an honest living (art. 34). Simplicity, however, is sometimes misleading.

21. *Opúsculo patriótico, que pronunció el ciudadano teniente coronel graduado Francisco Santoyo, como miembro de la junta patriótica de esta ciudad [de Orizaba] el día 11 de septiembre de 1842* (Colección Lafragua, Biblioteca Nacional, Mexico City), 16.
Because in theory everyone was a citizen if they were of age (the article does not even specify that you need to be male to be a citizen, though this apparently went without saying, since female suffrage in Mexico did not exist until 1957), the Constitution and the congresses that met after its ratification were very much concerned with giving moral shape to the citizen.

Fernando Escalante ends his pathbreaking book on politics and citizenship in Mexico’s nineteenth century arguing that “there were no citizens because there were no individuals. Security, business, and politics were collective affairs. But never, or only very rarely, could they be resolved by a general formula that was at once efficacious, convincing and presentable.”22 His book demonstrates that there was a high degree of pragmatic accord between liberals and conservatives on the matter of laws and institutions not being applicable in a systematic fashion because consolidating state power was more fundamental and urgent, and neither group could adequately resolve the contradiction between creating an effective and exclusive group of citizens and the actual politics of inclusion and exclusion demanded by the society’s numerous corporations.

Despite this pragmatic agreement regarding the priority that consolidating state power had over citizenship rights, the ideal of citizenship was about as obsessively pervasive in Mexican political discourse as was the rejection of politics as a site of vice. Part of this obsession was a result of the fact that, until Juárez’s triumph over Maximilian in the late 1860s, political instability and economic decline raised realistic fears that Mexico could be swallowed up by foreign powers or split apart by internal rifts. Collective mobilization seemed the only way forward in all of this, and there is a sense in which Mexican history between Independence and the French Intervention (1821–67) can be seen as a process of increasing polarization. In the end it was this process, in conjunction with emerging capitalist development and the construction of the first railroads in the 1870s, that allowed for the first successful centralized governments of Juárez and, especially, of Diaz, to operate.

Escalante has demonstrated that the old idea, championed by Cosío Villegas, that Juárez’s restored republic was a genuine experiment in liberal democracy is simply wrong, and that the consolidation of the central state under Juárez needed to sidestep the legal order and to create informal networks of power as much as the Diaz dictatorship that followed it.23

I have no space here to go into details concerning the evolution of citizenship under the Porfirio Diaz regime (1876–1910), but a few remarks are necessary. Cer-

22. Escalante, Ciudadanos imaginarios, 372.
23. Escalante, Ciudadanos imaginarios, 375–76.
tainly, the achievement of governmental stability and material progress pushed earlier recurrent obsession over citizenship to the background. A plausible hypothesis is that a strong unified state and the concomitant process of economic growth led by foreign investment was a more valued goal for the political classes than citizenship. In fact, the earlier fixation on citizenship was due, in large part, to the fact that regional elites needed to call on altruism in order to try to hold the Mexican state together; once the state could not hold its own, this motivation disappeared.24 A discourse on “order and progress” quickly superseded the earlier emphasis on citizenship and the universal application of laws as the only way to progress; a strong state that could guarantee foreign investment was the key to that progress.

Thus, during the Porfirian dictatorship it was the state, and its power to arrange space and to regiment an order, that was the subject of political ritual and myth; the masses, it was hoped, might eventually catch up to progress or—if they opposed the national state, as the Yaqui, Apache, and Maya Indians did—they would be eliminated. In short, whereas the law and the citizen were the ultimate fetishes of the era of national instability,25 progress, urban boulevards, railroads, and the mounted police (rurales) were the key fetishes of a Porfirian era that upheld the state as the promoter of that progress, and the vehicle for the ultimate improvement of Mexico’s abject rural masses.26

Contemporary Transformations

If this were the end of the story, however, how could we come to terms with the fact that in the 1930s Samuel Ramos, the famous founder of a philosophy about

24. In the case of Texas and New Mexico, altruistic appeals to national identity and shared religion were the principal resources used by Mexico to try to keep those territories in the republic. See Andrés Reséndez, “Caught between Profits and Rituals: National Contestation in Texas and New Mexico, 1821–1848” (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1997).

25. On 7 February 1868, just a few months after the execution of Maximilian von Hapsburg, the project for a law trying to ritually enshrine the 1857 Constitution was presented to Congress. The justification for this proposal is significant: “It is unquestionable that this talisman [the Constitution of 1857] that is so loved by the Mexican people, was the cause of the prodigious valor that distinguished us in the bloody war that has just passed” (cited in Tovar, Historia parlamentaria, 398; emphasis in original).

the Mexican as a social subject, identified the *pelado* (urban scoundrel), that is, the subject who had been considered beyond the pale of citizenship since Independence—as the quintessential Mexican? Ramos argued that Mexican national character was marked by a collective inferiority complex. This inferiority complex was exemplified in the attitude of the pelado who is so wounded by the other’s gaze that he replies to it aggressively with the challenge of *Qué me ves?* (What are you looking at?). Therefore, where the driver of our earlier Mexico City example seeks anonymity in order to act like a wolf, but becomes a gentleman with eye contact, the pelado rejects eye contact with a threat of violence. But while the nineteenth-century politician would not have hesitated in identifying the true citizen with the (unconstantly) amiable driver and the pelado as an enemy of all good society and an individual lacking in love and respect for his patria, post-Revolutionary intellectuals like Ramos made the urban rabble into the Ur-Mexicans. Why the change?

Before the Revolutionary Constitution of 1917, Mexican citizens had the right to vote and very little else. The right of education existed in theory but, as historical studies of education have shown, public education during the Porfiriato was controlled to a large extent by urban notables, a fact that was reflected in extremely low literacy rates. Moreover, as I mentioned earlier, the right to vote was often nullified by the machinery of local bosses, who controlled voting as a matter of routine.

The 1917 Constitution and the regimes following the Revolution changed this in a couple of significant ways. First, under the leadership of José Vasconcelos in the 1920s, and in an effort to wrench the formation of citizens from the hands of the Church, public education went on a crusade to reach out to the popular classes. This effort was successful to a significant degree, and schools were built even in remote agrarian communities. Second, the 1917 Constitution established the right of access to land. The land, in this constitution, belonged to the nation, as did the subsoil and territorial waters. Correspondingly, citizens had rights to portions of that national wealth under certain conditions. Third, the 1917 Constitution specified a series of workers’ rights, including minimum wages, the prohibition of child labor, the prohibition of debt peonage, maximum working hours, and the like. Thus, being a citizen promised rights of access to certain forms of


protection against the predatory practices of capitalists who, significantly, were often identified as foreign.

Identifying members of the urban rabble as the prototypical Mexicans was, in this context, consonant with the state’s expansive project. The modal citizen should, indeed, be the affable and reasonable member of the middle classes—and Ramos’s portrayal of the pelado was in no way laudatory—however, Mexico’s backwardness and the challenge of its present made it useful to identify the typical subject as being off center from that ideal.

At the same time, the Revolutionary state, like the Porfirian state, did not concern itself so much with producing citizens. Instead, the goal was to create and to harness corporate groups and sectors into the state apparatus. Although Presidents Álvaro Obregón and Plutarco Elías Calles upheld the ideal of the private farmer in the 1920s and thought it a much more desirable goal than that of the communitarian peasant, the task of building up the state was more important to them than that of establishing the citizen.

The principal shift between the Porfirian and the post-Revolutionary state is that the latter consolidated a political idiom of inclusive corporativism that could be used to complement the Porfirian (but still current and useful) theme of the enlightened and progressive state. By the time President Lázaro Cárdenas nationalized the oil industry (1938), political discourse in the Mexican press by and large lacked any reference to the ideal citizen and portrayed, instead, a harmonious interconnection between popular classes under the protection of the Revolutionary state.29

In short, early republican obsession with citizenship was primarily due to the extreme vulnerability of Mexico’s central state. It was not produced by an existing equality among citizens, but rather by existing divisions among the elites. As soon as a central state was consolidated, citizenship went from being seen as an urgent and supreme ideal to being a long-term goal that could be achieved only after the enlightened, scientific, state had done its job. In turn, this perspective was transformed by the post-Revolutionary state, which complemented it with the organization of the pueblo into corporations that were regulated and protected by the state.

These broad shifts have had their corresponding counterparts in the history of the private sphere. The private sphere of citizens in Mexico has never been very fully guaranteed. In the early republican period, liberals identified corporate forms

of property as a central obstacle to citizenship: Specifically, they targeted the property of Indian communities and of the Church. However, the expropriation of both communal and ecclesiastical corporate holdings in 1856 did not lead to the desired end, which was to create a propertied citizenry, but, instead, to even greater concentration of landed wealth in the hands of an oligarchy. As a result, enormous proportions of the population lacked a secure private sphere and lived either as dependents or as members of communities whose rights could only be defended collectively.

After the 1910 Revolution the state sought to protect individuals from slave-like dependence on the oligarchy; however, the relations of production that it fostered were equally problematic from the point of view of the consolidation of a private sphere. Agrarian reform failed to build a Lockean citizenry in the countryside because ejidatarios (land grantees) are not legal owners of their land. Moreover, they depend on local governmental support for many aspects of production, and so are feeble participants in the construction of a bourgeois public sphere. Similarly, the numerous indigent peoples of Mexico lack a secure private sphere, as ethnographies of the so-called informal sector have amply attested. People in the informal sector lead lives that are largely outside of the law; as a result, they need to negotiate with state institutions in order to keep tapping into illegal sources of electricity, in order to keep vending in restricted zones, to keep living in property that is not formally theirs, and so on.30

Thus, although incorporation to a modern sector was one of the critical goals of post-Revolutionary governments, the modalities of incorporation retained significant sectors of the population that not only did not benefit from access to a private sphere that was immune from government intervention but in fact depended on government intervention in order to eke out a living in a legally insecure environment. Of the three sectors that made up Mexico’s state party, two—the peasant sector and the popular sector—had no sacrosanct private sphere from which to criticize the state, and therefore no protected basis for liberal citizenship.

This situation, which of course does not exist in Brazil in the same way, complicates the vision of citizenship as a debased category, for it is through claims of citizenship that the peasantry and the informal sector have negotiated with the

post-Revolutionary state—exchanging votes and participation in Revolutionary national discourse for access to lands, to credits, to electricity, or to urban services. At the same time, this citizenship belongs to a faceless mass, not to a collection of private individuals. The pelado who in Ramos’s account felt wounded by the mere gaze of the erstwhile modal citizen, and who asserted his right to nationality by his involvement in Revolutionary violence, is harnessed back into nationality not through patron-client ties to private elites, but through a series of exchanges with state agencies through which he receives the status of massified citizen.

Let me illustrate what the shape of official citizenry was like in the era of single-party rule. In the PRI’s 1988 presidential campaign, which was in many respects the last traditional PRI campaign, public rallies and events were divided into several types. First, there were events targeted to specific portions of the party’s tripartite sectorial organization (Peasant Sector, Labor Sector, and Popular Sector); second, there were meetings with regional and national groups of experts who organized problem-focused discussions with the candidate and an audience (CEPES and IEPES); third, there were massive public rallies that were meant to show the Party’s muscle by uniting the whole pueblo in a single square; and fourth (this was an innovation for the 1988 campaign), there were talk show–like events where the candidate fielded questions from callers who were not identified as members of a party sector.

The image of the nation as it was generated in the massive public rallies was that of a corporate organism. Like public displays of the social whole since the colonial period, the public of these rallies was divided internally by sectors, each of which signaled its corporate presence with electoral paraphernalia (sheets painted with the candidate’s name and the name of the supporting sector; flags, t-shirts, tags, or hats printed with the candidate’s initials and those of the party or sector), but also with a certain uniformity of look: peasants in their hats and sandals, railroad workers in their blue hats, schoolteachers in their middle-class garb, and so on.

Alongside this hierarchical and organic image of the nation as composed of complementary, unequal, and interdependent masses, campaign rituals also presented certain modal images of citizenry. This is apparent in the use of dress in the various rallies, for although the presidential candidate often dressed up as a candidate

member of the sector that he was visiting (dressing as a rancher when in a rally of
the peasant sector, as well-dressed worker in a rally of the labor sector, and in a
suit in a discussion with the experts), the relationship between “the suit” and other
costumes is not one of equality. Rather, the suit is the highest formal garb, the one
that the candidate will use on a daily basis when he is in the presidency, and the
one that he has daily used as a government official prior to becoming a presiden-
tial candidate. The suit is the modal uniform of the public sphere. Public sessions
devoted to the discussion of regional and national problems are attended almost
exclusively by suits, even when their inhabitants are representing interests associ-
ated with labor or agriculture. Thus, the image of the citizen with a voice stands
in contrast to the massified citizen.

This situation has been identified by Mexican democrats as a lack of a civil
society, and these same democrats have been building a narrative of Mexican
democracy that has the heyday of the corporate party (the 1940s and 1950s) as the
zero-point in Mexican citizenship. According to this view, the corporate state
effectively funneled Mexican society into its mass party until the 1960s, when
certain groups, especially middle-class groups—but also some peasants and urban
poor—no longer found a comfortable spot in the state’s mechanisms of represen-
tation and of resource management, producing the 1968 student movement.32 The
violent suppression of this movement, and the expansion of state intervention in
the economy in the 1970s, gave a second wind to the corporativist state. How-
ever, an unemcompassable civil society would keep growing during this period
and would reemerge politically in the mid-1980s, when the state’s fiscal crisis
weakened its hold on society. This situation has been leading inexorably to the
end of the one-party system and the rise of Mexican democracy.

During the period of state party rule, political classes in Mexico had a pretty
clear mission, which was to tap into resources by mediating between state insti-
tutions and local constituencies. It was in this period that a clever politician
coined the phrase vivir fuera del presupuesto es vivir en el error (to live outside of
the [state’s] budget is to live in error). The expansion of the state for several dec-
ades was a process of ever-incorporating political middlemen as new social move-
ments emerged. So, in the 1970s and 1980s positions were created for leaders of
squatters’ movements, for leaders of urban gangs, for student movement leaders,
for teachers’ movement leaders, and others. The fiscal crisis of the state that

32. Today this version is common wisdom, but for a succinct synthesis of this perspective, see
Lorenzo Meyer, Liberalismo autoritario: Las contradicciones del sistema político mexicano (Mexico
City: Oceano, 1996).
began in 1982 severely limited its possibility of engaging in this cooptive strategy, and so the numbers of NGOs in active service rose dramatically, as indeed did opposition parties. So much so, that today much of the country is governed by the opposition, and there is a good chance that the PRI will lose the presidential election of the year 2000.

There has undoubtedly been an intensification of citizen activity in this period, with vast numbers of people rejecting massified corporate forms of political participation that are no longer providing real benefits and with strong voter participation, as well as a huge increase in participation in political rallies, demonstrations, and the like. The press, too, has broken with the unspoken rule of preserving the figure of the national president from direct attack, and its criticisms of government have become much louder.

At the same time, the fact that many political leaders and mediators are now living outside of the fiscal budget may also mean that a new form of massified citizenship is being constructed. The economic costs of democracy and democratization are so far very high in Mexico, and a lot of money is going to all political parties, as well as to running electoral processes. Elections and electoral processes have become a source of revenue in their own right, and the jockeying between party leaderships could become divorced from the ever-growing needs of the country’s poorest, particularly because the middle and proletarian classes are now large enough to sustain such an apparatus. This situation is illustrated by the fact that today there is undoubtedly more democracy in Mexico than at any time in recent memory; however, the extent of urban insecurity, the numbers of fences and walls, and the presence of the military and of private security guards are also at their highest levels in recent memory.

In this junction, like in the post-Revolutionary years in which Ramos was writing, there is an increasing number of people who are unprotected by relations of private patronage, unprotected by the state, and with insufficient private possessions to participate as reliable citizens. By contrast, as in the unstable years of the early and mid-nineteenth century, there is an increasingly large class of lumpen-politicians that seeks to funnel the “bad pueblo” into “factious” movements. And the passage from unruly anonymity to amicable personal contact may become more strained as the capacity to claim that “the one who gets angry first, loses” itself loses credibility.
Conclusion

Da Matta’s analysis of the relationship between liberal and Catholic-hierarchical discourses in the negotiation of citizenship is a useful entrypoint for the description of debased forms of citizenship as they have existed in Iberoamerica. However, his strategy is best suited to highlight the micropolitics of access to state institutions and does not clarify the specific ways in which citizenship is filled and emptied of contents; it therefore misses a critical dimension of the culture of citizenship, including how, when, and by whom it is politicized.

In this essay I have sketched out a rough outline of the politics surrounding citizenship in modern Mexico. There have been two periods when discussions of citizenship have been truly central to political discourse. The first period, which I analyzed in some detail, is the era of political instability and economic decline that followed Mexican Independence; the second is the contemporary, post-1982 debt crisis period of privatization and decline of single-party hegemony. The view that I developed suggests that the intensity of discussions surrounding citizenship in the first five decades after Independence reflected both the complex politics of including or excluding popular classes from the political field and the fact that national unity seemed unattainable by any means other than through unity among citizens and violence against traitors (be these indigenous groups or fractious “tyrants” with their clientelle of canallas). In other words, citizenship was continually invoked as the first and foremost need of the nation at a time when the country had no effective central state, had a declining economy, and was threatened by both imperial powers and internal regional dissidents.

Beginning with President Juárez, but especially under President Diaz, the national state was consolidated and a national economy was articulated, thanks to the state’s capacity to guarantee both foreign investment and national sovereignty. As a result, the “bad pueblo” was slowly neutralized and substituted only by the growth and expansion of what I have called the “abject pueblo,” or the people who were not fit for citizenship (not knowing how to read or write, not speaking Spanish, and living in conditions of servitude that effectively preempted participation as full independent citizens). In the process, the national obsession with citizenship diminished even as the celebration and fetishization of the state as the depository of rationality, order, and progress grew. The combination of national consolidation, rapid modernization, and the extension of a truly degraded form of citizenship to the vast majority is part of the backdrop of the Mexican Revolution of 1910.

The constitutional order that emerged from the Revolution allowed Mexicans
access to a series of benefits, including land and protection against employers. Nevertheless, the post-Revolutionary order did not either achieve the ancient liberal goal of turning the majority of the population into property holders. In fact, the fragility of the private sphere for large sections of the population has been one of the constants in modern Mexican history. As a result, the revolutionary state combined the Porfirian cult of enlightened, state-led progress with an organicist construction of the people.

This Revolution gave citizenship another kind of valence. Instead of attacking communal lands and trying to transform every Mexican into a private owner, post-Revolutionary governments gave out land and protection as forms of citizenship, but they retained ultimate control over those resources. As a result, citizenship in the post-Revolutionary era (up to the mid- or late-1980s) can be thought of in part as massified and sectorialized, since peasants and workers of the so-called informal sector received benefits on the force of their citizenship, and yet lacked independence from the state. Thus, the debased citizen that da Matta speaks of is clearly different in the pre-Revolutionary and the post-Revolutionary periods since, in the latter, “nobodies” could make claims for state benefits on the basis of their collective identity as part of a revolutionary pueblo, whereas in the former they could not.

Part of the current difficulty in Mexican citizenship is that social critics acknowledge that state paternalism and control over production led to undemocratically undemocratic forms of rule and, indeed, to policies that led to the bankruptcy of the country. Still, at least the 1917 Constitution envisaged parceling out some benefits to people by virtue of the fact that they were citizens. The contraction of the state has produced massive social movements and a very strong push around democratization and the category of the citizen, but the current emphasis on electoral rights risks emptying the category of its social contents once again, and given the fact that Mexico still has a large mass of poor people with little legally private property or stable and legally sanctioned work, and given, too, that Mexico’s state is still incapable of extending rights universally, we may yet see the reemergence of a pernicious dialectic between the good pueblo and the bad pueblo.

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