

A negotiated ethnic identity: San Rafael, a French community on the Mexican Gulf Coast (1833-1930)

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More than eighty years after the social and political upheaval that shook Mexico, the Revolution is still considered as the watershed in the process of the construction of the Nation-State. I will take this fundamental event as a space in which a particular group of inhabitants has reconsidered and re-modelled its way of projecting its presence in local and regional society. I wish to question the way in which relatively slow adaptative processes were either accelerated or interrupted by the Mexican Revolution both as a macro socio-political process, and as a local expression of power struggles between existing and emerging forces. Therefore, I must dwell upon different dimensions: on the one hand, with time — the short-term macro event, an unrepeatable series of actions, and longer-term local and communal processes —; on the other, with space — a local area located on the Mexican Gulf coast, with varying degrees of integration on a regional basis, with certain tentacles which situated its actors on a national and even an international stage —.

Although the history of this community continued, I chose to end this article around 1930, given that the more recent aspects of the process are to be the subject of further research. 1930 represents a kind of watershed, an approximate date around which the new ground rules of revolutionary Mexico were being established.

THE NINETEENTH CENTURY BACKDROP

In 1833, a relatively small group of French subjects landed on the coast of the Mexican Gulf at the port of Nautla, some 150 kilometres

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to the north of the city of Veracruz. Apparently, there was no official preamble to their arrival; nevertheless their presence responded to a nascent Mexican policy for the colonisation of its humid tropical lands. At the same time, the group's migration responded to social and political tensions on French soil, which in the eyes of some French politicians could be linked to strategic designs in the struggle for commercial power on world markets (SKERRITT, 1992 a; MEYER, 1974; WEBER, 1976; MOULIN, 1988).

The apparent mutual convenience of migrations from France to Mexico also coincided with similar fundamental processes, that is, both countries had recently thrown off the habits of the *ancien régime*, at least on a political level, and both were deeply involved in nation-making, once their republican and national character had been set out on paper.

Much has been written on the effects of the French Revolution upon Latin American independence movements; however, one point is worth underlining, which heavily flavoured the future representation of the group of immigrants on the Gulf coast. During the first half of the 19th. century, Mexican liberal circles held the French people in very high esteem. Mexican intellectuals with access to French culture constructed an heroic and revolutionary image of the French people (DUMAS, 1988). For example, Nicole GIRON (1990: 177-9) analyses the content of Ignacio M. Altamirano's nationalism which was solidly constructed upon a French inheritance. Speaking in France towards the end of the century, he said:

"Ah! What a Revolution that was! What men they were! — How prodigious and what ideas! [...] You must always love noble and beautiful France, the redeeming and thinking nation. We who learnt our ideas on liberty from the sermon of '89, we too love her!"

Nicole Giron concludes:

"C'est donc par le biais d'une francophilie politique et philosophique, assise sur l'adhésion sans réserve aux idéaux révolutionnaires de 1789 qu'Altamirano sent qu'il participe de la modernité historique."

This kind of notion of the Frenchman as a prototype for liberty and democracy was deep-rooted even during the first half of the century. In spite of diplomatic and military skurmishes between Mexico and France, that image was not substantially damaged. For example, in 1838 Mexico expelled all French citizens from Mexican soil following

the incident commonly known as the *War of the Cakes*¹. However, the group which had arrived in 1833 met with general López de Santa Anna, who was not particularly liberal in thought. He had just been seriously wounded by the French forces, in spite of which he recognised the honesty and labour of the colonists, and he granted them safe conducts permitting them to stay in the country (DEMARD, 1987: 89-116)².

Even the imperial interlude of the 1860's did not seriously damage the French image in Mexico. On the one hand, Altamirano could unload the sole responsibility for the European intervention upon Napoleon III, underlining the community of interest between Mexican liberals fighting against the Empire's troops and the true French republicans who suffered at the hands of the tyrant. On the other hand, the second half of the 19th. century saw the growth of an elitist vision of France, enthroned as the herald of wealth, prosperity and urban modernity (GIRON, 1990: 171-2): it was taken as a material and cultural model to be copied, but not to be extended as a popular and democratic concept.

THE FOUNDATION OF A COLONY

Since 1828 an *ex-fourieriste* and ex-paymaster in the French army, Stéphane Guénot, harboured the idea of forming a model agricultural colony. A visit to Mexico, where he fell sick, put him in contact with his co-national, Dr. Chabert. The latter convinced him to buy a large plot of land (in Jicaltepec), near the small port of Nautla to the north of Veracruz. By 1833 he was able to ship the first group of migrants out of Le Havre to the Gulf coast. The group was made up almost exclusively of peasants and small agricultural producers from the Bourgogne and the Franche-Comté, especially from the village of Champplitte, in the Department of the Haute-Saône (DEMARD, 1987)³.

The 80-odd migrants (and those of two subsequent expeditions) had very strong internal ties. In the first place, they came from a part of France which had a long political history of resistance to

¹ The French government claimed some 3 millions francs on behalf of its subjects living in Mexico, enforcing its demands with a naval blockade and a military landing.

² This episode is repeated not only in published works but in manuscript and oral testimonies of the inhabitants of the colony.

³ Jean MEYER (1974) underlined the peculiarity of this migration; in spite of a constant flow of Frenchmen to Mexico since the 18th. century, the Jicaltepec experience was the only group not made up of urban-dwellers.

incorporation within a national territory (LERAT *et al.*, 1981). Maybe this kind of feature would have had little or no direct effect upon isolated village-dwellers; however, it would have acted as a break upon the development of a world-vision much wider than the space laid out by day-to-day life and work. In the second place, the migrants tended to move as whole families. For example, in 1833, 39 people left Champlitte for Jicaltepec; only 3 were bachelors with no direct ties to the rest of the group. In the 1835 expedition, none were so registered (DEMARD, 1987: 282-5). Whole units of family enterprise were uprooted and transplanted: in one case, the head of family arrived with his wife and children, her parents, and even the *domestiques*.

The land purchased by Guénot was located in Jicaltepec, an ancient Totonac indian settlement, long de-populated by the Spanish colonial policy which had concentrated the tributary and labour force in and around strategic points. However, the colonists arrived to find remnants of indian practices of social and spatial organisation. At the same time, they would have to share space with Spanish *criollo* and *mestizo* landowners, even if they were relatively few in numbers given the adverse occidental image held regarding this type of low-lying, hot, humid and selvatic lands.

Guénot's project was a sorry failure, as was the case of so many others during the first half of the century (SKERRITT, 1992 a); by 1835, he had fled the colony amidst bitter recriminations and heavy debts.

In this context, the first 30-odd years of the colony's existence were marked by a simple sense of survival: many died, others returned to France or sought fresh avenues in different parts of Mexico; however, a fair proportion stayed on⁴. As one written testimony states:

Those who remained "[...] became aware that collective labour had given few results, and they decided to work on their own account, and each family formed its separate ranch [...] they turned back upon the ancient and traditional individualism of their race" (BERNOT, 1970: 13).

Guénot's collective project had failed, and the survivors withdrew into individual practices; however, a strong sense of community was imposed. From their days in the east of France, these peasants had been used to individual enterprise within a strict regulatory structure: in the case of Champlitte and its surrounding hamlets collective

⁴ In 1853, the French consul in the port of Veracruz reported that Jicaltepec had 400 French workers (Archives nationales de Paris: F12/2695, Role 2, 1 August 1853).

controls over vine and hemp culture, were exercised by the local authorities (DEMARD, 1987: 19-46).

But on Mexican soil it was very difficult to reproduce completely their native social structure. Formally, they were subject to the nascent Mexican administrative system, in the most direct sense, to the *municipio* in nearby Nautla, then to the cantonal seat in Misantla, further to the west. This formal constraint did not prevent them from forming a kind of parallel administrative structure, to the extent that the State authorities in Veracruz never really decided if Jicaltepec was an independent *municipio* or not⁵.

The most obvious area in which the surviving colonists showed their ability to construct a social space, using their point of origin as a basis, was the institution of a strong endogamous practice. Not only were marriages restricted to the confines of being a member of the colony, but during the first years, to the village of origin in France. A popular saying from Tarn-et-Garonne cited by WEBER (1976: 49) was a guiding rule (*'Prends la fille de ton voisin, que tu vois passer chaque matin'*). Much later, after mid-century, there was a noted relaxation of the saying to extend the endogamous group to include more or less any Frenchman (by birth or descent): new relations of neighbourhood were under construction.

During the first phase of the colony, up to and including the European intervention in the 1860's, there was no projection of 'Frenchness'. A clear idea of the introverted village community-based identity which was produced in those first years was illustrated when a member of the group (Joseph Prestot) wrote about the war to his relatives in Champlitte.

« La guerre nous a causé bien des désagréments tant pour notre commerce que pour notre correspondance et notre tranquillité. Mais, grâce à Dieu, aucune insulte grave ne nous a été faite de la part des Mexicains [...]. Seulement nous savons que les troupes françaises sont restées campées vers Puebla [...]. La guerre continue et on ne sait quand elle finira; c'est horrible de voir les vengeances de l'un et l'autre, le vol, le pillage, l'incendie, l'assassinat. Tout est jeu pour eux, tant d'un côté, comme de l'autre; et nous autres, nous sommes obligés de subir tout cela... » (my underlining) (cited by DEMARD, 1987: 143, 148).

⁵ I discuss the duality of administrative spaces in SKERRITT (1992 b). The existence of parallel primary schools, the presence of a French vice-consul up until 1916, and the faculty to levy taxes were signs of the construction of an autonomous structure in the community. In other cases, this duality was officially recognised: for example, the failed colonisation in the canton of Acayucan, see THOMSON (1974) and FLORESCANO (1977).

Written in 1863 and 1865, these two fragments clearly show that the notion of *US* only includes the inhabitants of the colony, who in turn, demonstrate no affinity to one or the other side in the war: both Mexicans and French are relegated to *THE* instead of *OUR*. There were no affective relations except those developed within the community itself, or with relatives and friends in the old continent.

FROM SURVIVAL TO GROWTH

From mid-century, several modifications came about within the colony: from survival, the colonists passed to a stage of growth and consolidation. In the first place, they had learnt to exploit two basic indian products: maize and vanilla. On this productive level, they were not slow to recognise the need for interaction with the isolated members of the local Totonac society, a relationship which allowed them to assure their basic reproduction — cereals —, and to forge a thriving trade in a prized luxury product — vanilla —. Such was their success that by 1856, the French consul in the port of Veracruz wrote:

« Vanille: La production de cette graine est presque le monopole de la colonie française de Jicaltepec. Nos colons s'adonnent beaucoup à la culture de cette orchidée, culture très délicate qui demande beaucoup de soin, mais donne [...] de bons résultats. »
(ANP, F12/2695, Role 1, 1 November 1859).

The possibilities for material growth determined two basic changes over the experience of the first years of survival, once Guénot had fled the colony. On the one hand, the relatively homogeneous make-up of the group began to fade away: originally they were all peasants and village-dwellers. The economic prospects which the colony presented, attracted different kinds of immigrants: the most notable were Barcelonettes, merchants *par excellence*. Therefore, a more urban-orientated group sprang up, composed of new individuals who entertained a far closer contact with the notion of modernity and of their 'Frenchness'. Even some members of the original group increased their contacts with the 'modern' world, given their growing insertion in commercial circuits: some traded their vanilla with French merchant houses in the port of Veracruz, while others chose to take their produce directly to Bordeaux or some other marketplace in France. International trade began to close the gap between peasants from a relatively isolated part of France, and their would-be nation of origin. We could easily say that during this period, an economic enclave was in formation, with the colonists as a kind of terminal point for the concentration of export products (CLAVAL, 1992: 141-2).

On the other hand, by mid-century, a series of events⁶ led to a process of territorial expansion. Between 1850 and 1874, the colonists' quest for land took the form of tenant-farming, subject to the conditions of the local *mestizo* owners or absentee proprietors. However, after 1874, many of the colonists acquired property over plots to the north of the original settlement, on the other side of the river Bobos. One account of the 1890's has it that on the south bank, the colony possessed some 3,000 hectares, mostly for cattle pastures, and 20,000 on the north side of the river, of which about a quarter was cultivated (CHAMBON, 1992: 241).

This growth did not escape the attention of the State government. As late as 1851, the governor lamented the tremendous obstacles in the way of agricultural modernisation. At that time he stated that:

"The only quick and efficient remedy for such a serious illness is colonisation. That will bring to our country the muscle and industry we lack: it will introduce advances achieved in the agriculture of other parts [...], breaking down the obstacles which have held back our march towards progress, it will allow us to attain what less well-endowed nations have achieved." (Veracruz, 1986, vol II: 565).

By 1883, it seemed that the French colony was a successful experience, both for agricultural growth, and for the very State-forming quest. Thus, the state executive declared that the colonists in Jicaltepec and San Rafael:

"[...had] attained prosperity such that they have constituted a model colony in the State, given that they are occupying both banks of the Palmar [another name for the river Bobos] up to a total of 5 or 6 leagues of land, they have 200 houses and all the tools and animals they need for any kind of agricultural and industrial enterprise (Veracruz, 1986, vol. IV: 2082-3).

As we shall see, this image established a bridge between colonists and high authority.

Furthermore, we can see that it was felt that the French were particularly endowed to push Mexico towards modernity. This was very clear in the 1883 declaration, given that the governor could have applied similar concepts to an Italian colony a little further north of San Rafael (the point of major growth after the French colonists were able to possess land as private property). In spite of the

⁶ Trade possibilities led to a quest for space capable of producing vanilla or tobacco. Also, the ownership of the original plot of land, supposedly bought by Guénot, was in doubt, and the local *cacique* tried to oust the colonists.

existence of this other colony, similarly dedicated to the culture and commercialisation of vanilla, the executive made no mention of it.

Thus the government established 'otherness' as an impulse for development, which would lead to the modification of 'native' practices, and thus form a new basis for the Mexican nation.

At the same time, we find that the colony itself began to project this self-image, which by the second half of the century could combine both the notion of democracy and fraternity — a revolutionary essence —, with that of an elitist, modern culture in a 'backward' social formation.

AN END OF CENTURY FABRICATION: A FRENCH IDENTITY

The dynamic development of the colony, particularly with the extraction of vanilla, and the centering of commerce on trading houses set up in Jicaltepec and San Rafael by the colonists, meant a process of adaptation within the social context of the locality. From the beginning, the colonists had to learn how to collect vanilla from the indians. Later, they were able to import artificial pollination techniques and disseminate them among local producers, both indian and *mestizo*. By the latter part of the 19th. century, daily intercourse for the buying and selling of vanilla, tobacco, salt, maize and a long list of other products meant an adoption of the Spanish language, particularly on the part of menfolk.

Closed endogamous barriers were also breaking down. Firstly, social differentiation led to marriages within the community, which ignored the principle of place of origin. Marital ties were also beginning to be established with *hispanos*. By 1882, we even find a marriage celebrated between a man of French descent and a woman of indian origin (first entry in the Civil Register of the *municipio* of Martínez de la Torre)⁷.

Given this process of social integration, there was a counterpart which established the specific nature of the colony and of its members. Up until the 1910 Revolution, the community maintained the principle of bilingual education: daily processes were breaking down the use of French, while in the class-room, French was underscored (BERNOT, 1970: 48). By 1873, the State had founded a publicly funded primary school in Nautla; however, M. Jean Bourillon gave classes to the

⁷ However, to date, a marriage between a member of the 'French' community and somebody classified as 'Indian' is not well looked upon.

colonists' children, with all expenses paid by the French community. Once again the idea of 'modernity' was linked to this group: while the public school gave instruction in reading and writing, the list of subjects for the French children also included arithmetic, grammar and geography (Veracruz, 1986, vol. III: 1630-91).

Of course this could be read as a kind of planned integration within local society, as a rather cautious approach to the course of daily life. However, it became clear that this was not the case. On the contrary, by 1896, the notion of a far-away culture as the basis of 'otherness' was firmly established. In that year, the leading figures in San Rafael founded the *Société française de secours mutuel*. Its constitutive document stated the following:

« Loin de la mère patrie, il est de notre devoir de nous secourir mutuellement, de sauvegarder nos intérêts et de veiller à l'éducation de notre famille. Nous ne pouvons efficacement parvenir à ces buts divers qu'en nous associant. Ayant en vue l'utilité publique que serait appelée à donner une telle association, et tout le profit moral que chaque membre en tirerait, il a été décidé dans une réunion tenue au mois de mars [...], par plusieurs colons de cette localité, sous la présidence du doyen d'âge, M. Vincent Meunier, de fonder [...] » the said Society (cited by DEMARD, 1987: 174-5).

This declaration of principles is very interesting from several points of view. It establishes that the colonists have their own interests, even though the process of economic and social integration on a local scale was by now very far advanced. Education was highlighted as the basic point around which the possibility of closing the gap with the mother country revolved. This aspect was underpinned by the first president of the association, François Bernot, and its first secretary, Jean Simonin: both were school masters and fervent advocates of French language teaching as a vehicle for the defense of 'Frenchness'. Was this a defensive attitude in the face of the growing loss of the use of French, or was it an attempt to sustain a position of social superiority in the light of contemporary Mexican elitist thinking on the question of modernity?

The mention of "moral benefits" strongly suggests that the objectives of the society were more propositive than defensive. Implicitly, it proposes that a French society would render these "moral benefits", whereas some kind of mixed association would not, or at least, one outside of a French orientation, would not. A curious symbiosis had taken place: a moral stance emanating from the French Revolution, could give rise to an exclusive creation.

This elaboration of a 'difference' had two sides to it. On the one hand, it gave substance to, and justification for the social differentiation

constructed in the locality, in which the colony constituted the hub of productive and commercial activity. On the other hand, it constituted a bridge between the colony's members and the highest echelons of the Mexican political class. A clear case of this occurred in 1902, when Dr. Alphonse Pétin wrote directly to state governor Dehesa. His problem was an insignificant incident in Nautla with Mr. Zamora, the municipal secretary. However, his missive clearly expressed the concept held by him of his 'Frenchness' as opposed to the local expressions of 'Mexicanness', which were not the same as 'national Mexicanness' which well understood the possible ways of achieving modernity:

"Mr. Governor, please excuse my taking the liberty of worrying you with such a small matter. I am sure that Zamora can produce witnesses against my claims (anything is possible in Nautla), but I too can produce witnesses, and *mine are honourable*. I can also present you with character references written by persons in the highest spheres of the Mexican Republic" (Archivo General del Estado de Veracruz, Gobernación, 1902, 27 March 1902).

As such, here we have an identity constructed with the intention of fostering a high level support for the continued development of a local society dominated by the economic growth attained by the colony's farmers and merchants. The moral rectitude of a member of the colony had to be recognised by the highest authorities; if not, they could not be modern. The incident was immediately brought to an end in favour of Pétin.

At this point it is worth going back to the question of the colony's insertion in a political, administrative and social space. Although there were doubts about the precise situation of Jicaltepec vis-à-vis the municipal seat in Nautla, by the end of the century, it had been established that no formal autonomy existed. Even though a few members of the French community tried to run for office, they achieved no local level political representation. By 1882, the colonists established to the north of the river, in San Rafael, found themselves subject to a new municipality (Martínez de la Torre), carved out of what was previously the territory belonging to Tlapacoyan. As was the case in Jicaltepec, they did not enjoy a particularly strong position in this new local government.

The process of material growth experienced in the later years of the nineteenth century gave rise to competition for productive space, markets and the scarce labour-force between colonists and newly arrived merchants, who began to consolidate around Teziutlán and Martínez de la Torre. While day-to-day work and trade required increasing degrees of sociability on a local and regional scale, the

possibility for the formal exercise of power was diminishing. Thus, the need to underline the French content of the community's identity in order to establish a dialogue with the political elite (be it in Xalapa — the state capital —, or Mexico City).

Thus, while the colony could clearly be identified as a material power in the region, the same could not be said of its political nature. This apparent vulnerability came to the fore when the Revolution exploded in 1910, as we shall see in the following section.

THE REVOLUTION

The Revolution brought about a fundamental change for the continued existence of the colony in San Rafael/Jicaltepec. By the beginning of the 1920's, foreign land-holdings were perceived as a serious obstacle both to economic development, and to political sovereignty: one contemporary study concluded that some 22 million hectares fell within the constitutional exclusion laid down in 1917⁸, and there was a call for a nation-wide programme of expropriation and indemnisation of overseas property-holders (SILVA HERZOG, 1959: 279).

The inhabitants of the San Rafael/Jicaltepec colony fell well within this restriction, given that their lands were no more than 30 kilometres from the Gulf coast, or as little as 5. Although many were second or third generation members of the local society — a kind of French *creole* —, up until 1916, there was a permanent vice-consul in the community, who formed a direct link to maintain French nationality, registering births, marriages and deaths.

So, from a very formal point of view, 'Frenchness' was being questioned. However, on a national level, it would seem that little real action was taken to enforce either the expropriation of foreign property, or the nationalisation of foreign subjects.

Nevertheless, in the case of the state of Veracruz, the matter of foreign property was particularly sensitive, given the predominance of English and North American oil companies in the region, and the power they could exercise over vast areas, and over the very possibility for economic development. Well before the 1917 Constitution, local and regional revolutionary leaders had brought anti-foreign tensions to a head, especially in the oil fields in the north of the state, which led to the North American occupation of the port of Veracruz from

⁸ The 1917 Constitution established that foreigners could not possess rural property within 100 kilometers of the frontier, or 50 of the coast.

1913 to 1914. From 1914 to 1932, there were three state governors who stood out for their anti-foreign stances: Cándido Aguilar (1914-1920), Adalberto Tejeda (1920-1924 and 1928-1932), and Heriberto Jara (1924-1927) (FALCÚN and GARCÍA, 1986; CORZO *et. al*, 1986).

As such, there is no documental evidence which backs up the idea, but *vox populi* in my study region maintains that Tejeda figuratively held a pistol to the colonists' heads: 'either you are Mexicans, or you are out!' Maybe there is a strong and simple anecdotal element in this representation. Be that as it may, the fact is that during and immediately after the Revolution, the ground rules changed. The colonists could no longer hope to use their identity as a passport to high political levels; on the contrary, given the formal legal situation, and the particular sensitivity of the foreign question in Veracruz, they could only hope for rejection rather than help. At the same time, a fundamental link with the reproduction of 'Frenchness' was severed. In 1916, the vice-consul in San Rafael was removed; although the possibilities for retaining formal French citizenship remained, the process was no longer to be so direct and almost automatic⁹.

The nationalistic ideology of the Revolution in formation was a backdrop, but not necessarily the determining factor in local processes. At the San Rafael/Jicaltepec level, the formal identities of 'national' and 'foreign' were fast dissolving since the 19th. century. More than a political and ideological aspect of the Revolution, the struggle in the area revolved around the social conflicts which had built up over social relations of power and domination. The French colony was obviously recognised as a dominant force in the material structure of local society: members of its community were dynamic elements in the local marketplace, showing a great capacity to extend their direct control over property. But also, and maybe of more importance was their ability to concentrate the production of a vast range of small agricultural producers in the region, be it of vanilla or maize.

For example, the written testimony of a 'mixed' member of the community illustrates this. A Mexican from the *sierra* region to the west moved to the area of the colony, where he married into the Graillet family in the 1890's. His marriage gave him access to commercial and financial circles maintained by the colonists in the port of Veracruz and France, and towards the *sierra* in Teziutlán. In turn, this allowed him to set up a small retail business, at the same time as being able to buy small producers' maize crops when the markets in Veracruz, Campeche or Villahermosa promised high prices (VÁZQUEZ GRAILLET, 1982). The Vázquez's either did their business

⁹ As such the vice-consuls were members of the community; the last one, Alphonse Roussel, stayed on even though he no longer bore diplomatic credentials.

on their own behalf or in society with other local merchants (for example with a Spaniard, Rafael Sainz, or with Améré Thomas, both of whom had warehouses in San Rafael), plus a broker in the port of Veracruz (*ibid.*, notebook I: 59-60; III: 1-4).

As can be seen from this kind of example, the dominant economic circles were not now the exclusive property of the French colonists, even though they still played a fundamental role. Spaniards, Mexicans, Italians, even a North American were on the list of strong merchants; however, their activity was centered upon San Rafael, that is, upon the social space which had been created almost exclusively by the colonists.

While the later 19th. century idea held by Mexican liberals that France represented 'modernity', the technical advances achieved by the colonists always came to the fore. However this covered up their adaptative strategies within certain practices and structures which had strong roots within the area: for example, that of *mestizos* which centered upon large land-holdings for extensive cattle-ranching. By the time of the Revolution, French families were married into *mestizo* groups such as the Arellano family, to the extent that, what was projected as dynamic and modern (French) was intimately linked to one of the principal 'backward' elements (traditional latifundism) identified by revolutionary thinkers as a main obstacle to social change.

Thus, the Revolution was a time in which contradictions inherent to the construction of the identity which had taken place during the process of integration and adaptation of the colony came to the fore. As such, the modernising element never disappeared: from the 19th. century experiments in new practices for vanilla production and novel ways of organising trade quotas moved on in the 20th. century into banana cultivation with new varieties and the introduction of high-yield cattle breeds adapted to tropical climates. In this sense, members of the colony were prime elements in the formation of capitalist enterprise in the area. But on the other hand, they were drawn into social relations which were seriously questioned on the ideological level, and also at the social level with the upheaval brought about by the formation of new social figures, especially that of the *ejidatario*, the beneficiary of land reform after the Revolution.

The Revolution did not take an anti-modern stance; on the contrary, many of its thinkers were trying to gather together the misplaced pieces of 19th. century liberalism (SKERRITT, 1989). However, there were changes with respect to how to achieve the goal, which could basically be reduced to the need to turn inwards upon 'native forces', be they indian or (preferably) *mestizo* (for example, MOLINA ENRÍQUEZ, 1909; OROZCO, 1911).

Therefore, the colonists were in a particularly difficult position. They were the most obvious agents for economic modernisation within their regional context, but they were foreigners. For some of the ideologues who gave body to the Revolution, especially in its agrarian aspects, the *mestizo* rancher was one of the brightest hopes for achieving the goal of modernity, while the peasant converted into *ejidatario* was simply a transitional figure. Within the 1917 Constitution, the small and middle-sized rancher or farmer seemed to be privileged. However, in the San Rafael area, *mestizo* property owners were not exactly prototypical for the foundation of a modern ranch or farm economy. And by now, certain members of the colony were firmly entrenched within the *mestizo*'s ranks. For example, two of Fernando Vázquez Graillet's brothers (Leobardo and Eduardo) married two Arellano sisters (Concepción and Elena) (VÁZQUEZ GRAILLET, 1982).

The Arellano family was particularly important within the local society during the Revolution. In the first place, they were part of the group of ranchers who lived and worked in the area, they were not absentees. Their prime economic activity was cattle-ranching, especially the fattening of calves, on a land-extensive model. They were, therefore, a counterpart of what the French colonists were supposed to represent, that is, small-scale land-owners, with modern intensive production processes. During the Revolution, the Arellano's became the focal point for the resistance to external change, especially that which accompanied the Constitutional-Carrancista movement, which coupled the notion of modernisation with the need to recognise peasants (above all) as actors on the national scene. Two brothers, Carlos and Arturo Arellano, formed armed units which operated over a fairly extensive area between the foothills of the *sierra* and the coast. They were very loosely allied to Félix Díaz, nephew of deposed dictator, Porfirio Díaz. However, they had little interest in forming any kind of political platform; their only apparent concern was the defense of their territory against outside agents who threatened to introduce new actors on the local stage (especially peasants).

A quotation from Vázquez Graillet's texts illustrates the extent to which civil war, economy and the defense of local sociability were intertwined during the revolutionary years:

"Quite soon Don Arturo [Arellano] sent word to his son Santiago, the father of my girlfriend, telling him to get some cowhands together, in order to round up his cattle and get it off his property, using only legal means [...]. An in-law of the Arellano's and I were invited to take part in the cattle-drive, [...]we rounded up more than 600 head, which we passed through San Rafael. But as there were *carrancistas* in Paso de Telaya, we passed through the arable plots, and when we shut the animals in the corral, the *carrancistas* surrounded us,

taking the cattle away. I was very annoyed because I wanted to be on good terms with Don Santiago" (VÁZQUEZ GRAILLET, 1982, II: 68)

Everyday activities were inextricably linked to revolutionary events, and in this context, the inhabitants had to establish a certain degree of clarity in their identity and loyalties. Even though there was little apparent direct participation on the part of the colonists in the armed movement, their passive attitude towards the Arellano 'rebels' was enough to label them as partisans.

What may have been 'French' during the 19th. century was now inextricably tied into an identity centred upon local land-owners: 'modern' and 'traditional' were now one and the same. 'Frenchness' had been created at a time when its participants were literally forging a land market and commercial circuits; it was associated with a process of establishing relations of social domination in the area. However, their association with, or integration within certain existing structures which did not demonstrate a similar dynamic capacity left them open to severe attacks when the Revolution brought a modifying breeze: a reformed concept of modernisation with different social actors.

'Frenchness' could no longer be sustained in its end of 19th. century terms. The machinery was put into reverse. Now the colonists were Mexicans: many sought their formal nationalisation, and the recurrence to the French civil registry ceased, not only because the vice-consul had been removed, but because they no longer pursued a direct anchorage to their European descent.

Family relations changed too. Intercourse between family members in San Rafael and those still in Europe slowed down or died out. The coincidence of two upheavals was a major contributor to this process: the Mexican Revolution and the First World War. Even before the outbreak of both wars, the vanilla trade had taken a different course: France looked more towards its formal colonies than to Mexican production. The war came as an outright breaking point as most international commercial activity ground to a halt. The agricultural product which had established certain aspects of an economic enclave in the area, fell into deep depression, and the colonists had to look inwards for some 20 years, until new possibilities opened up in the 1930's, with the banana trade and US fruit companies. Therefore one of their principal points of material sustenance was seriously diminished, to the extent that what had previously been frequent return visits to France (both for pleasure and business) were cut short by lack of money and the interruption of communications: even the flow of letters dried up (BERNOT, 1970).

The most evident symptom of change within the identity of this community during the revolutionary years, was the virtual disappearance of the French language. While the colonists were forging their social space during the 19th. century, there was an obvious process of adoption of Spanish, especially between men. However, the home was still a place where French was practised and maintained between husband and wife, and their children. The wife and bilingual schooling were the main bases of sustenance. After the Revolution, the principle of French language teaching was completely dropped. On the other hand, there was a conscious attempt on the part of the menfolk to suppress its use in the household¹⁰. It was not until the 1940's and with the intervention of the *Alliance française* that attempts were made to renew interest in French language and the cultural past of the colony.

THE RECONSTRUCTION

So, the Revolution brought about a fundamental withdrawal from the basic elements upon which superiority had been constructed in the second half of the 19th. century. The new problem for the French descendants was how to construct their identity as Mexicans, given that they were by now part of a wider local culture. As such, the Revolution simply forced the question which was being generated over a period of some 20 years, ever since the conscious attempts to reinforce 'Frenchness'. The Revolution promised, or threatened a redistribution of land, while the colony had been intimately related to a process of territorial expansion. Being linked by family ties and business deals with *mestizo* ranchers, the colony fell into a single category as far as peasants and the agrarian reform bureaucracy were concerned: land-owners, liable to be expropriated. Furthermore, the decline of the vanilla trade and the inward-looking pressures of the war years led to an expansion of cattle-ranching activities within the community. At this point it is worth mentioning that the main enemy identified by agrarian leaders during the formative years of their struggle (the 1920's) was precisely the cattle-owner, linked to his traditional practice of large plots of land with few animals per hectare (FOWLER, 1979).

¹⁰ This was borne out by an informant, Celine Cancienne (interviewed in 1992), who still speaks *patois*. She concludes that her continued practice of the language was due to the fact that in her household there were no men, given that she was an orphan, and lived with her abandoned aunt. Outside the house, she was pressured by male members of the community to stop speaking French in public.

One of the earliest demands for agrarian reform in the area clearly expressed the idea that peasants without lands related both *mestizos* and French as a single enemy. In 1918, the claimants asserted that in Jicaltepec their only hope for access to land was by way of tenancy, at high rents. Their sad demise was due to:

“[...] the bad faith of a man called Celso Acosta who was the local *cacique* of this place, an ambitious man, and on the other hand, to a number of foreigners who wanted to keep a large part of the land, or at least to take control of the best parts. Between them, they managed to get the help of the government of General Díaz, who snatched the land from our community” (Comisión Agraria Mixta, File 102, 10 September 1918).

The demand for land was directed indiscriminately at, for example, the properties of the Arellano or Domínguez families, or those of the Prigada or Mahé. But it was also interesting to see that the claimants, although mainly of hispanic origin, also included members of the Grappin, Carmet and Mothelet families (*ibid.*).

Beneath the apparent growth of a united colonial community during the second half of the 19th. century, the process of material accumulation had given rise to a social differentiation within the French group. This was kept under cover by the fabrication of identity achieved during its later years. With no explicit space for the development of a class-based identity, material differences were subordinated to quasi-ethnic or national aspects.

Here I have to return to the end of century fabrication. That process took place in the light of material consolidation and growth. As I mentioned, it also attracted other individuals and groups (Spanish, Italian and Mexican landowners and merchants). Therefore, the collective identity of the colony revolved around these perceived differences¹¹. These were the cover for the growing internal differentiation within the colony.

However, the Revolution changed the axis around which identity was to be conceived. Its very formalities forced a more class-based structure of collective identities: peasants versus landowners. The peasants highlighted the foreign image of their enemies, while the French contingent of the landowners strove to repress or reformulate their quasi-ethnic or national otherness, upon which they could no longer operate.

¹¹ This was underlined by the creation of a new *municipio* (Martínez de la Torre) in 1882, to which San Rafael was formally subordinated. It became the seat of power exercised by new *mestizo* groups, and to date, conflict is rife between the two localities.

In spite of the Revolution's impositions, 'Frenchness' did not disappear completely from the 20th. century reconstruction. The new version of 'them' and 'us' was elaborated upon the notion of envy and underhandedness, tying them into a parallel process through which France had also passed, and that of a return to survival. A part of BERNOT's (1970) text helps illustrate this:

"In those days [before the First World War], France was a rich nation which attracted the treasures of the world; the French franc inspired confidence and was accepted throughout the world. France was overrun by rich visitors [...], there was no need for visas nor passports on her frontiers [...]. But unfortunately so much prosperity and wealth fomented the avarice of other nations, who envied so brilliant a situation [...]. The same happened in San Rafael: after the happy boom years."

While the Revolution forced the pace of mexicanisation within the colony, the French background was still a prop to justify the 'us' as legitimate, hard-working goal-achievers, while 'they' were unworthy, sneaky land-grabbers. Even though the colony's members were more and more part of a local land-owning group, they still sought their particularity to distinguish them from *mestizo* ranchers and agrarian reform peasants.

A WIDER VISION

The beginning of the 20th. century marked a period of accelerated change for the study area. The world space took on a new dimension: France was much further away than at mid— 19th. century. This could be seen in the commercial sphere, as vanilla shipments to France dwindled, and with the war years, stopped. The shift in French world interests reflected the rapid drift towards the new division of the hemispheres; North American interests were fast growing, and this fact had its impact in San Rafael. Even in the 1890's the economic distancing process was being felt, as the colonists were progressively forced to send more of their produce to the United States. This also caused a sense of betrayal, that France was abandoning its citizens to: either an inward-looking future, or one with external partners with whom there would be no affective (real or created) ties (CHAMBON, 1992: 243).

Thus macro-space changed fundamentally. Now the question was in what terms the colonists could recreate their identity. Although distance was placed between them and the mother country, 'Frenchness' was still a tool for collective identity at local and Mexican national level, until the Revolution gave a hefty push towards new

decisions. It was precisely the Revolution which proposed new elements in the relation of local and national space: it unleashed migrations, especially of peasants seeking land; it created new social actors within different institutions (popular mass organisation, and the agrarian reform apparatus for example). The new nationalist bent of the Revolution also caused an acceleration of the inward-looking process. As Mexicans, the colonists had to elaborate a scheme which took into account shared economic and political space, made smaller by national integration and the rapid peopling of the area.

'Frenchness' in its formal manifestations disappeared, but remained as a way of constructing a particular form of belonging to a social class, to justify their relatively comfortable material situation as against 'backward' partners in the area. Instead of a national identification, they sought to recover some of their original values, harking back to the days of survival, when the sense of community, of family and labour had been at the fore.

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