

2 A Sketch of Mexican Society

Joel R. Poinsett¹



Written shortly after the independence of Mexico, Joel Roberts Poinsett's travel account owes much to von Humboldt. As the South Carolina politician and slave owner wrote, "when I turn to the work of this extraordinary man, I am disposed to abandon my journal."² Yet Poinsett, who visited Mexico just after eleven years of incessant fighting had led to independence, takes a more somber view of the future than von Humboldt. For instance, he finds the silver mines flooded, and he points out that the cost of transportation in a mountainous landscape imposes limits on the possibilities for U.S.-Mexican trade and the growth of agriculture.³ The following excerpt is most interesting for its description of urban proletarians, also known as leperos. In Poinsett's view—no doubt influenced by his origins in a slave state of the U.S. South—racial mixture created the type of moral degradation that would keep Mexico far below the potential identified by von Humboldt. This stereotype of the poor mestizo as a combination of the weaknesses of his Spanish and indigenous ancestors would remain pervasive in nineteenth-century writing about Mexico.



Born in Charleston as the son of a physician, Poinsett (1779–1854) studied at the University of Edinburgh, where he graduated with a degree of medicine. He spoke several languages, touring Europe and Asia before serving as special U.S. agent in the Southern Cone during the Wars of Independence. Poinsett settled in Charleston, where he bought a plantation and entered into politics. In August 1822, President James Monroe appointed him emissary on a special mission to Mexico, then under the government of Emperor Agustín Iturbide, the winner of the Wars of Independence. The journal of the resulting two-month stay produced the book Notes on Mexico excerpted below. During his stay, Poinsett founded the Yorkish Masonic lodge, the origin of Mexico's Liberal party. In 1825, Poinsett was appointed the first U.S. minister to Mexico, with a special charge of negotiating the United States' annexation of Texas and other Mexican territory in the north. He left in 1830 having accomplished little except bringing a plant home that still bears his name.⁴



The gentlemen with whom I have associated are intelligent men; and those who have had it in their power to pursue liberal studies, are fond of literature and science. The Creoles in general possess good natural talents, and great facility of acquiring knowledge. They are extremely mild and courteous in their manners, kind and benevolent towards each other, and hospitable to strangers. Their besetting sin is gambling. The married women are very pleasing in their manners. They are said to be faithful to the favoured lover, and a liaison of that nature does not affect the lady's reputation. The young women are lively and accomplished. They sing and play agreeably, dance well, and know all they have had an opportunity of learning. If they would leave off the detestable practice of smoking, they would be very pleasing and amiable.

This is to be understood as characterizing the society⁵ generally. There are certainly some young ladies (very few I am afraid) who do not smoke—some married women (many I hope) who have no lover, or if this would be interpreted to derogate from their charms, who consider him only as a convenient dangle; and are fondly and faithfully attached to their husbands; and there are certainly many gentlemen who are not gamblers.

It is difficult to describe, accurately, a nation composed of such various ranks, and of so many different castes as that of New Spain. The most important distinction, civil and political, was founded on the colour of the skin.

Here, to be white, was to be noble; and the rank of the different castes is determined by their nearer or more distant relation to the whites: the last on the scale being the direct and unmixed descendants of the Africans or Indians.

The character of the Indian population, which exceeds two millions and a half, remains very much the same as that of the lower class of natives is described to have been at the time of the conquest. The same indolence, the same blind submission to their superiors, and the same abject misery are to be remarked. The forms and ceremonies of their religion are changed, and they are perhaps better pleased with the magnificence of the Catholic rites than with their former mode of worship. They take a childish delight in forming processions, in which they dress themselves most fantastically; and the priests in many parts of the country have found it necessary to permit them to mingle their dances and mummeries with the catholic ceremonies. They were oppressed and trodden under foot by their Emperor and *caciques*;⁶ and ever since the conquest, they have been oppressed by laws intended to protect them. For the most part, they are distributed in villages, on the most barren and unproductive lands, and are under their own *caciques*, who are charged with the civil government, and with the collection of the tribute, a tax of about two dollars on each male from ten to fifty years of age.⁷

The castes, that is to say, the *mestizos*, descendants of whites and Indians, mulattoes, descendants of whites and negroes; *zambos*, descendants of negroes and Indians—are scattered over the country as labourers, or live in the towns as artisans, workmen or beggars. There are some Indians, who have accumulated property, and some few of the castes may be seen living in comfort and respectability, in the cities and in the country, but these instances are rare. From the *cacique*, or Indian magistrate of the village, to the most abject of his fellow-sufferers, they are indolent and poor. The only difference between them is that the *cacique* does not work at all. By a law passed since the revolution they are declared, together with all the castes, to be possessed of the same rights as the whites. The tribute is abolished: but they will be, as a matter of course, subject to the *alcabala*, or tax on the internal commerce, from which they were heretofore exempt. This declaration will produce no alteration in the character of this class of the population. Measures must be taken to educate them, and lands distributed among them, before they can be considered as forming a part of the people of a free government.

The titled nobility are white Creoles, who, satisfied with the enjoyment of large estates, and with the consideration which their rank and wealth

confer, seek no other distinction. They are not remarkable for their attainments, or for the strictness of their morals. The lawyers who, in fact, exercise much more influence over the people, rank next to the nobles. They are the younger branches of noble houses, or the sons of Europeans, and are remarkably shrewd and intelligent. Next in importance are the merchants and shopkeepers; for the former are not sufficiently numerous to form a separate class. They are wealthy, and might possess influence, but have hitherto taken little part in the politics of the country—most probably from the fear of losing their property, which is in a tangible shape. The labouring class in the cities and towns includes all castes and colours; they are industrious and orderly, and view with interest what is passing around them. Most of them read, and, in the large cities, papers and pamphlets are hawked about the street, and sold at a cheap rate to the people. The labouring class in the country is composed, in the same manner, of different castes. They are sober, industrious, docile, ignorant and superstitious; and may be led by their priests, or masters, to good or evil. Their apathy has in some measure been overcome by the long struggle for independence, in which most of them bore a part, but they are still under the influence and direction of the priests. They are merely labourers, without any property in the soil; and cannot be expected to feel much interest in the preservation of civil rights, which so little concern them. The last class, unknown as such in a well-regulated society, consists of beggars and idlers—drones that prey upon the community, and who, having nothing to lose, are always ready to swell the cry of popular ferment, or to lend their aid in favour of imperial tyranny. The influence of this class, where it is numerous, upon the fate of revolutions, has always been destructive to liberty. In France, they were very numerous; and the atrocities which disgraced that revolution, are, in a great measure, to be ascribed to this cause. In Mexico, these people have been kept in subjection by the strong arm of the vice regal government; but it is to be feared, that they will hence-forward be found the ready tool of every faction. The priests exercise unbounded influence over the higher and lower orders in Mexico; and, with a few honourable exceptions, are adverse to civil liberty. . . .

The mass of the people here will not for many years consume foreign manufactures. Their dress is simple and they are accustomed to wear cloth made in the country, and in many instances to manufacture it themselves. The Indians and common people wear leather breeches, loose at the knees, a leather jerkin, which descends to within three or four inches of the waistband

of the breeches, no shirt nor stockings, sandals of hide, or shoes wide and open about the ankles. Over this dress they sometimes wear a *manta*, (the Poncho of Peru) a square cloth, having a hole in the centre, through which the head is thrust. Cotton is raised in the country, and their flocks furnish abundance of wool of tolerably good quality. Their cloths are dyed of various colours, which they understand how to fix, and to render bright and durable. Their manufactures are either on a very small scale, in towns, or are domestic as in the country, where families make what little they require. The machinery is very defective and the cotton is all separated from the seed by hand. Everything in this country is done by manual labour, and by dint of main strength. In large farms we have seen labourers carrying the corn and blades from the fields to the barn on their backs; some times asses are used for that purpose, and I have thought they might be made very useful in our southern country in that way, especially in harvesting rice. From habit, the labourers in this country will carry very great burdens. A band is placed across the forehead, and another across the breast, which strap on the load, and the man bends forward and moves at a trot. In the city of Mexico water is distributed by men, who carry a very large jar on their backs, supported by a band across the forehead, and a smaller one suspended from a band round the back of the head, which, as they lean forward, swings clear of the body and legs. They carry two loads in this manner from the fountain, up two pair of stairs, for a *medio*, the sixteenth of a dollar. . . .

Our large cities are many of them neater than Mexico, but there is an appearance of solidity in the houses, and an air of grandeur in the aspect of this place, which are wanting in the cities of the United States. With us, however, a stranger does not see that striking and disgusting contrast between the magnificence of the wealthy and the squalid penury of the poor, which constantly meets his view in Mexico. I have described the palaces of the rich—the abode of poverty does not offend the eye. It is beneath the church porches, in miserable barracks in the suburbs, or under the canopy of heaven. There are at least twenty thousand inhabitants of this capital, the population of which does not exceed one hundred and fifty thousand souls, who have no permanent place of abode, and no ostensible means of gaining a livelihood. After passing the night sometimes under cover, sometimes in the open air, they issue forth in the morning like drones to prey upon the community, to beg, to steal, and in the last resort to work. If they are fortunate enough to gain more than they require to maintain themselves for a day,

they go to the *pulquería*, and there dance, carouse, and get drunk on *pulque* and *vinu mescal*, a brandy distilled from the fermented juice of the agave. Around and under the *pulquerías* are open sheds covering a space of from fifty to a hundred feet; men and women may be seen in the evening, stretched on the ground, sleeping off the effects of their deep potatoes. These people, called by Humboldt, *saragates* and *guachinangos*,⁹ are more generally known by the name of *léperos*.⁹ They are for the most part Indians and Mestizos, lively and extremely civil, asking alms with great humility, and pouring out prayers and blessings with astonishing volubility. They are most dexterous pick-pockets, and I heard of some instances of their sleight of hand, that surpass the happiest efforts of the light-fingered gentry of Paris or London.¹⁰

From what I have said of the *léperos* of Mexico, you will compare them to the *lazzaroni* of Naples.¹¹ The comparison will be favourable to the latter, who work more readily, steal less frequently, and are sober.

[In Puebla], we met more miserable squalid beings, clothed in rags, and exposing their deformities and diseases, to excite compassion, than I have seen elsewhere. Among the principal causes to which this great and growing evil is to be ascribed, are a mild climate and a fertile soil, yielding abundantly to moderate exertions. In countries like these, the people rarely possess habits of industry. They are accustomed to work only so much as is essentially necessary to support life, and to live from hand to mouth. If they meet with any accident, if they lose a limb, or are wasted by disease, they enter the towns and subsist by charity. This is peculiarly the case here, as this town especially abounds in convents. We counted more than one hundred spires and domes in this city. Each of these institutions supports a certain number of poor, who receive a daily allowance of provisions at the convent door, without prejudice to the sums they pick up by soliciting alms in the street. The custom of begging in the streets existed in Mexico before the conquest, and Cortés speaks of the Indians begging like rational beings, as an instance of their civilization. And in fact it was the greatest he could have given. A people in the hunter state never beg or give in charity. In times of scarcity the old and infirm are sometimes killed from compassion. They are useless, and no one is willing to devote any of his labour to support them. In the shepherd state, want and beggary are unknown. They are found only in agricultural, manufacturing, and mercantile communities, and especially under mild climates and in fertile territories, or where, from excess of civilization, the poor are provided for by law. The reason is the same in both

cases; the poor are rendered improvident by the provision made for them by nature, or by the regulations of civilized society....

In front of the churches and in the neighbourhood of them, we saw an unusual number of beggars, and they openly exposed their disgusting sores and deformities to excite our compassion. I observed one among them wrapped in a large white sheet, who, as soon as he perceived that he had attracted my attention, advanced towards me, and, unfolding his covering, disclosed his person perfectly naked and covered from head to heel with ulcers. I am not easily affected, but this disgusting sight thus suddenly presented to my view, turned me sick, and I was glad to be near home. No city in Italy contains so many miserable beggars, and no town in the world so many blind. This is, I think, to be attributed to constant exposure, want, and the excessive use of ardent spirits....

It is Sunday, and the inhabitants of the neighbouring villages have crowded into the town to hear mass. The men are well dressed in leather breeches and jackets, and most of them have shirts and stockings, and a manta thrown over their shoulder.

The women are neatly dressed, and look clean and healthy. Their dress consists of a shift, one or more petticoats of striped cotton stuff, and a shawl, which they throw gracefully over the shoulder, and which they are never without when in company. I have seen them washing and cooking, very much distressed to manage this part of their dress, but persevere in wearing it, notwithstanding the inconvenience it put them to....

Strolling through the village, I stopped to speak to two ladies, who were standing at the door of one of the largest and neatest cottages. They invited me in, and seemed delighted to have an opportunity of asking about the fashions of other countries, and how the ladies dressed in the other America. They had on pearl necklaces, and dark striped calico dresses, which cost, they told me, two dollars and a half a yard, and which was certainly not worth half a dollar.

They rejoiced with exceeding great joy at the independence of the country—"Now, that we are not governed by the *gachupines*,"¹² we shall be supplied with handsome stuffs at a cheap rate." From a better motive, no doubt, the ladies of New Spain have always favoured the cause of independence. I have, too, found them every where republicans.¹³...

I have found the peasantry of this country, both Indians and castes, an amiable and a kind people, possessing the utmost good nature, and great

natural politeness. I have never seen in the country, any one of them make use of a vulgar gesture, nor heard a harsh or even an unkind word pass between them. When drunk, they are ungovernable, and are savage and brutal in the extreme; but their drunken fits are "few, and far between," and when sober, they are humble to their superiors, submissive and docile, and to each other kind and polite. They are, I think, a virtuous and an orderly people, attentive to all the ceremonies of their religion, and observant of their moral duties. Thefts are so uncommon among them, that our baggage was generally left under a shed; and assassinations are extremely rare, and when they do occur, may always be traced to drunkenness. I was surprised to find this state of morals existing among the peasantry of a country, so lately devastated by civil war, forming a strong contrast with the character of the lower orders of people in the capital, and in other large cities in the kingdom, immoral and vicious in the extreme.



Notes

1. Joel Roberts Poinsett, *Notes on Mexico Made in the Autumn of 1822 Accompanied by an Historical Sketch of the Revolution and Translations of Official Reports on the Present State of That Country with a Map by a Citizen of the United States* (Philadelphia: H. C. Carey and I. Lea, 1824), 40-41, 47-48, 72-73, 118-22, 141, 194, 198, 200-201.
2. Poinsett, *Notes on Mexico*, 43.
3. *Ibid.*, 95-96.
4. On Poinsett's career, see, among others, José Fuentes Mares, *Poinsett: historia de una gran intriga* (Mexico City: Editorial Jus, 1951); Dorothy Martha Parton, *The Diplomatic Career of Joel Roberts Poinsett* (Washington: Catholic University of America, 1934); and J. Fred Rippy, *Joel Poinsett, Versatile American* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1935).
5. The word is used here in the sense of "high society" (*buena sociedad, gente bien*).
6. Local boss.
7. A much less favorable description than von Humboldt's, one that does not credit the indigenous Mexicans with having achieved a high level of civilization before the Conquest.

8. A *huachinango* is a red snapper. In colloquial Spanish, the "g" and "n" in this word are freely substituted. This is also the word Cubans used to refer to Mexicans, and it is the likely origin of the word "chilango," a derogatory term for inhabitants of the capital.
9. Literally, "lepers," meaning "untouchables."
10. How different would Poinsett's judgment be today, when Charleston, just like Mexico City, has a visible population of homeless people?
11. Similar class of urban poor in southern Italy.
12. Spaniards.
13. The word "republican" is used here in the original sense: for popular sovereignty and against monarchy.

