

## MAXIMINO'S BULLS: POPULAR PROTEST AFTER THE MEXICAN REVOLUTION 1940–1952\*

General Maximino Ávila Camacho (1891–1945) was one of Mexico's leading politicians after the revolution, a governor, businessman, clan leader, party fixer, and would-be bullfighter. For anyone interested in the underworld of popular protest after the Mexican Revolution he is an unlikely Virgil. Maximino was not much of a poet, unlike his gunman friend Gonzalo N. Santos, who once wrote of voters fleeing tommy guns 'like quail'.<sup>1</sup> Nor was Maximino an obvious guide to the supposedly hegemonic state-builders of the later 1930s and 1940s. He was, rather, the sort of regional boss whom country people called a 'lord of knife and noose', a man whose rowdy rancher posturing even Santos found overdone.<sup>2</sup> When told, for example, that his younger brother Manuel would become president in 1940, Maximino disparaged the latter as a 'steak with eyes' — echoing the British ambassador, who deemed Manuel 'about as colourful as a slab of halibut' — before pulling a knife and threatening to castrate a senator for not choosing him. Santos generally shrugged off such violent theatrics, though when Maximino loosed a bull on him even he took exception.<sup>3</sup> Yet Maximino was a principal

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<sup>1</sup> Maximino Ávila Camacho is generally abbreviated to 'Maximino', as 'Ávila Camacho' is reserved for his brother Manuel, president of Mexico, 1940–6. Gonzalo N. Santos, *Memorias*, 5th edn (Mexico City, 1987), 720.

<sup>2</sup> 'Señor de horca y cuchillo', a commonplace description of the more violent political bosses of the time. For an example, see *comisariado ejidal* Corral Falso to President Alemán, 23 Apr. 1950: Secretaría de la Defensa Nacional, Mexico City, 1-398/XIV.

<sup>3</sup> Santos, *Memorias*, 647, 747; Bateman to Attlee, 'Leading Personalities in Mexico, 1946': National Archives, London, Public Record Office (hereafter PRO), FO 371/60955. Even Hollywood may have realized the performative qualities of violence for Maximino and Santos. Peter Ustinov's *Viva Max!* (1969) invented revolutionary General 'Maximiliano Rodríguez de Santos', who invades Texas just to get a

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founder of Mexico's dominant party state.<sup>4</sup> That state has traditionally been depicted as a successful elite, top-down monolith that was — after the charismatic domination and disorder of the 1910s, 1920s and 1930s — relatively rational and bureaucratic.<sup>5</sup> Maximino, in stark contrast, seemed sufficiently irrational to be credited with 'a disordered mind' by one diplomat.<sup>6</sup> The

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government certificate that he has done so. Mexican censors banned the film and confiscated *Life* magazine for reviewing it. Archivo General de la Nación, Mexico City (hereafter AGN), Fondo Dirección Federal de Seguridad, 2937B.

<sup>4</sup> The most detailed account of Maximino's political career to date is that of Alejandro Quintana, 'The President that Never Was: Maximino Ávila Camacho and the Taming of Caudillismo in Early Post-Revolutionary Mexico' (City Univ. of New York Ph.D. thesis, 2007).

<sup>5</sup> Such an interpretation is a scholarly and popular commonplace, and can be found from the 'philanthropic ogre' described by Octavio Paz through the political science analysis of Pablo González Casanova to the histories of María Antonia Martínez, Luis Medina and Stephen Niblo. It has not been subjected to much examination for two main reasons: 1) the 1940s until recently marked the end of historiographical coverage of Mexico; and 2) the predominance of cultural approaches has kept most historians working beyond 1940 to alternative themes, such as Eric Zolov's treatment of the counterculture, Heather Fowler-Salamini *et al.*'s essays on gender and Gilbert Joseph *et al.*'s essays on recreation and popular culture. Post-revolutionary politics has only recently drawn scholarly attention in the regional studies of Rogelio Hernández, Tanalis Padilla and Ben Smith. Classic national-level political science analyses stress the regime's bureaucratic core: Frank Brandenburg deemed the 'official party' a mere 'appendage of the bureaucratic apparatus', while José Luis Reyna concluded that 'bureaucratization of the political process has been at the root of the Mexican political tradition since the 1930s. The resulting class relations make Mexico an authoritarian regime'. Octavio Paz, 'The Philanthropic Ogre', in his *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, trans. Lysander Kemp, Yara Milos and Rachel Phillips Belash (New York, 1985); Pablo González Casanova, *Democracy in Mexico*, 2nd edn, trans. Danielle Salti (New York, 1970); María Antonia Martínez, *El despegue constructivo de la revolución: sociedad y política en el alemanismo* (Mexico City, 2004); Luis Medina, *Civilismo y modernización del autoritarismo (1940–1952)* (Mexico City, 1982); Stephen R. Niblo, *Mexico in the 1940s: Modernity, Politics, and Corruption* (Wilmington, Del., 1999); Eric Zolov, *Refried Elvis: The Rise of the Mexican Counterculture* (Berkeley, 1999); Heather Fowler-Salamini and Mary Kay Vaughan (eds.), *Women of the Mexican Countryside, 1850–1990: Creating Spaces, Shaping Transitions* (Tucson, 1994); Gilbert Joseph, Anne Rubenstein and Eric Zolov (eds.), *Fragments of a Golden Age: The Politics of Culture in Mexico since 1940* (Durham, NC, 2001); Rogelio Hernández Rodríguez, *El centro dividido: la nueva autonomía de los gobernadores (Mexico City, 2008)*; Tanalis Padilla, *Rural Resistance in the Land of Zapata: The Jaramillista Movement and the Myth of the Pax Priista, 1940–1962* (Durham, NC, 2008); Benjamin T. Smith, *Pistoleros and Popular Movements: The Politics of State Formation in Postrevolutionary Oaxaca* (Lincoln, Nebr., 2009); Frank Brandenburg, *The Making of Modern Mexico* (Englewood Cliffs, 1964), 5; José Luis Reyna, 'Redefining the Authoritarian Regime', in José Luis Reyna and Richard S. Weinert (eds.), *Authoritarianism in Mexico* (Philadelphia, 1977), 161.

<sup>6</sup> Or as union leader Vicente Lombardo Toledano more delicately put it, 'a rare type, worthy of study by psychologists'. US ambassador to State Department, 31 Aug.

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mismatch is evident, raising the question of how the supposedly subtle authoritarianism of Mexico's *dictablanda*, 'the perfect dictatorship', could be ushered in by such cowboys.<sup>7</sup>

An obvious answer — that Maximino, Santos and others of their revolutionary generation were something of a dying breed when the newly technocratic politicians of the 1940s-designed *el sistema*, the Mexican 'system' — should not be disdained. There was a sea change in the way politics was done in Mexico between 1940 and 1952, a change that was expressed in (and to some extent caused by) shifts in personnel in key national and provincial roles. The cabinet in 1942 contained five generals, including major regional bosses and national power brokers; by 1952 the only military men remaining were the specialists in charge of the navy and the defence ministry. Governors from the mid 1940s onwards were increasingly civilian, centrally selected, and skilled in the everyday grind of bureaucratic rule; men such as Isidro Fabela in the Estado de México, Baltasar Leyva Mancilla in Guerrero or Adolfo Ruiz Cortines in Veracruz, men who reformed their Treasuries and set up public relations bureaux, were a different breed from their revolutionary predecessors.<sup>8</sup> Yet Mexican politics under the early Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), remained strongly personalist, and the great *cacicazgos* — clientelist regional fiefs — were winnowed out but not wholly eliminated.<sup>9</sup> The Cárdenas family ruled something of a 'Greater Michoacán', that at times incorporated parts

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1943; United States National Archive Record Group, Washington, DC (hereafter NARG), 812.00/8-3143; Niblo, *Mexico in the 1940s*, 283.

<sup>7</sup> Mario Vargas Llosa, 'La dictadura perfecta', in his *Desafíos a la libertad* (Madrid, 1994). The punning neologism *dictablanda* is made by replacing the 'dura' (hard) in *dictadura* (dictatorship) with 'blanda' (soft).

<sup>8</sup> Rogelio Hernández Rodríguez, *Amistades, compromisos y lealtades: líderes y grupos políticos en el Estado de México, 1942–1993* (Mexico City, 1998), 81–3; Ruiz Cortines reports 1944, 1946, in *Estado de Veracruz: Informes de sus gobernadores, 1826–1986*, ed Carmen Blázquez Domínguez, 20 vols. (Xalapa, 1986), xiii, 7215–18, 7408; Paul Gillingham, 'Baltasar Leyva Mancilla of Guerrero: Learning Hegemony', in Jürgen Buchenau and William H. Beezley (eds.), *State Governors in the Mexican Revolution, 1910–1952: Portraits in Conflict, Courage, and Corruption* (Lanham, 2009).

<sup>9</sup> The Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) was founded in January 1946 to replace the earlier state party, the Partido de la Revolución Mexicana (PRM). Popular and scholarly perceptions tend to overemphasize the continuities between the two; inside the PRI, primary elections for party candidates in particular provided (admittedly short-lived) substance to the prevailing rhetoric of democratization.

of the Tierra Caliente of Guerrero, from the time of Lázaro Cárdenas's presidency (1934–40) onwards; another ex-president, Abelardo Rodríguez, controlled the politics and strategic sectors of the economies of Baja California and Sonora until the 1950s; in San Luis Potosí, Santos controlled state politics until 1958; in Veracruz, General Alejandro Manguerra controlled the military, and consequently much else, until his retirement in 1959.<sup>10</sup> The newcomers, moreover, were not all starry-eyed builders of the rule of law. The first civilian president after the revolution, Miguel Alemán (1946–52), was initially hailed by diverse voices as a convinced democrat and reformer.<sup>11</sup> Yet diplomats and *don nadies* alike rapidly wrote off his inner circle as profoundly corrupt; by 1950 the net self-enrichment of the president and his *amigotes* surpassed, by one estimate, the external public debt; and the Alemán administration oversaw a turn not towards, but rather away from, competitive politics.<sup>12</sup> The leaders of the early PRI were not, in short, architects, disinterestedly designing a building they would never inhabit; they were a diverse mixture of technocrats and generals, bureaucrats and bosses, *caciques* and crooks, and their political and personal interests were thickly interwoven.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Delgado de Garay to Gobernación, 12 May 1950: AGN, Fondo Dirección General de Investigaciones Políticas y Sociales (hereafter DGIPS), 104/Orlando Delgado de Garay; Enrique Márquez, 'Gonzalo N. Santos o la naturaleza del "tan-teómetro político"' in Carlos Martínez Assad (ed.), *Estadistas, caciques y caudillos* (Mexico City, 1988), 392; Paul Gillingham, 'Force and Consent in Mexican Provincial Politics: Guerrero and Veracruz, 1945–1953' (Univ. of Oxford D.Phil. thesis, 2005), 123, 231–3.

<sup>11</sup> Bateman to Bevin, 21 Jan. 1947: PRO, FO 371/60940; Washington to State Department, 7 June 1948: NARG, 812.00/6-748; Bateman to Bevin, 24 Feb. 1947: PRO, FO 371/60940; Rodolfo Usigli, 'El caso de "El Gesticulador"' (1947), in Rodolfo Usigli, *Teatro Completo*, 5 vols. (Mexico City, 1963–2005), ii, 541; General Cándido Aguilar speech, Fortín, 11 Oct. 1951: AGN, DGIPS, 19/13.

<sup>12</sup> *Don nadie* (literally, 'Sir Nobody') is a term for everyman with slightly Pooterish overtones; an *amigote* is a crony. 'Leading Personalities in Mexico, 1946': PRO, FO 371/60955; report on market gossip, 26 July 1948: AGN, DGIPS, 111/2-1/260/82; Laurence Whitehead, 'On Presidential Graft: The Latin American Evidence', in Michael Clarke (ed.), *Corruption: Causes, Consequences and Control* (London, 1983), 150; Gillingham, 'Force and Consent in Mexican Provincial Politics', ch. 5.

<sup>13</sup> *Cacique* is a central term in both popular and scholarly accounts of modern Mexican politics: 'originally an Arawak term denoting a chief . . . During the nineteenth century . . . "cacique" came to mean a political boss, who — according to some — stood at the interface between "traditional" communities and the new ostensibly modern institutions of the (usually republican) nation state . . . a form of political boss, mediator or broker'. Alan Knight, *Caciquismo* in Twentieth-Century

To focus on the intentions of this variegated elite as the independent variable in post-revolutionary state formation — what we might call an ‘intelligent design’ approach — is to implicitly credit two assumptions. Elite designers could have imposed their state blueprints on a historically recalcitrant Mexican countryside only if prior revolutionary reform had purchased them considerable provincial stability and at the very least popular acquiescence; if, in other words, the 1930s had ended in a *pax cardenista*, a new social contract by which the ruled signed up to dominant party rule as the price of land grants and progressive labour policies. Furthermore, for elite designs to be implemented so completely in the provinces would require a relatively powerful and monolithic state lording it over a stratified society; a state in which caste divisions (PRIísta insiders/elites versus the rest) reliably trumped all other solidarities, so that popular protests and regional or cross-class coalitions would be of little salience in the course of national events.<sup>14</sup> Such assumptions underlay influential and long-lived interpretations of both the late revolutionary and the PRIísta state.<sup>15</sup> They coloured the first generation of histories of the 1940s and 1950s, criticized by Stephen Niblo as prey to ‘the logic of presidential centralism . . . the kind of history that reads like a summary of press clippings’.<sup>16</sup> Yet Niblo’s work itself rests on similar assumptions. Even as he uncovers forgotten popular protests such as the 1946 massacre in León, Guanajuato, they remain zero-sum games won, hands down, by a Machiavellian national elite who with monotonous regularity hold all the cards and rake in all the chips.<sup>17</sup> The thesis of

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Mexico’, in Alan Knight and Wil Pansters (eds.), *Caciquismo in Twentieth-Century Mexico* (London, 2005), 10.

<sup>14</sup> Kenneth Johnson refers to the ‘vast elite class’ of the PRI as ‘not really a party’ but rather a ‘caste’: Kenneth F. Johnson, *Mexican Democracy: A Critical View*, 3rd edn (New York, 1984), 129.

<sup>15</sup> ‘What emerged [from the revolution] was a leviathan state capable of controlling society’: Donald J. Mabry, ‘Changing Models of Mexican Politics: A Review Essay’, *New Scholar*, v (1976), 31–7; González Casanova, *Democracy in Mexico*, 12–30, 104–19.

<sup>16</sup> Niblo, *Mexico in the 1940s*, p. xix. Excessive ‘statolatry’ has long been a concern of historians of modern Mexico: see Alan Knight, ‘Historical Continuities in Social Movements’, in Joe Foweraker and Ann L. Craig (eds.), *Popular Movements and Political Change in Mexico* (Boulder, 1990).

<sup>17</sup> Niblo, *Mexico in the 1940s*, 152–9. For more on (the cultural aspects of) the León massacre, see Daniel Newcomer, *Reconciling Modernity: Urban State Formation in 1940s León, Mexico* (Lincoln, Nebr., 2004).

sweeping elite policy autonomy was (unintentionally) subjected to a *reductio ad absurdum* by Enrique Krauze, for whom twentieth-century Mexican history is a reflection of presidential biography: ‘a political solar system’, in which Mexicans ‘rotated around the presidential sun and his electoral machinery’, and opposition was confined to ‘almost imperceptible planets which orbited in the dark distance’.<sup>18</sup> In such work, John Tutino observes, ‘a few powerful men make Mexican history’.<sup>19</sup>

Yet this assumption — that far-reaching revolutionary stabilization led to sweeping corporatist state power — is no longer tenable. Recent studies of the 1930s have built on a longer tradition stressing the ‘limits of state autonomy’ in order to establish that Mexico was nowhere near ‘stability’ in 1940.<sup>20</sup> The embryonic historiography of the post-revolutionary period, meanwhile, raises multiple questions concerning what Jeffrey Rubin has called ‘the myth of state corporatism’.<sup>21</sup> It is clear that during the 1940s local elections could be fiercely competitive and their results unpredictable; that popular protests could veto the accession of mayors and governors, or topple them once in power; and that key presidential policies, such as conscription or literacy campaigns, could be successfully flouted, and even reversed, by massive civil disobedience.<sup>22</sup> The central government may have

<sup>18</sup> Enrique Krauze, *La presidencia imperial: ascenso y caída del sistema político mexicano (1940–1996)* (Mexico City, 1997), 136. For a trenchant critique of this ‘great-man theory of history with validity confined to Mexico’, see Claudio Lomnitz, ‘An Intellectual’s Stock in the Factory of Mexico’s Ruins: Enrique Krauze’s “Mexico: Biography of Power”’ in Claudio Lomnitz, *Deep Mexico, Silent Mexico: An Anthropology of Nationalism* (Minneapolis, 2001), 217.

<sup>19</sup> John Tutino, ‘Debating History to Face the Present and Imagine the Future’, in Elisa Servín, Leticia Reina and John Tutino (eds.), *Cycles of Conflict, Centuries of Change: Crisis, Reform, and Revolution in Mexico* (Durham, NC, 2007), p. x.

<sup>20</sup> Ben Fallaw, *Cárdenas Compromised: The Failure of Reform in Postrevolutionary Yucatán* (Durham, NC, 2001), 163–4; Adrian A. Bantjes, *As if Jesus Walked on Earth: Cardenismo, Sonora, and the Mexican Revolution* (Wilmington, Del., 1998), 219–24; Nora Hamilton, *The Limits of State Autonomy: Post-Revolutionary Mexico* (Princeton, 1982); Alan Knight, ‘Cardenismo: Juggernaut or Jalopy?’, *Jl Latin Amer. Studies*, xxvi (1994).

<sup>21</sup> Jeffrey Rubin, ‘Popular Mobilisation and the Myth of State Corporatism’, in Foweraker and Craig (eds.), *Popular Movements and Political Change in Mexico*.

<sup>22</sup> Thomas Rath, “‘Que el cielo un soldado en cada hijo te dio . . .’: Conscription, Recalcitrance and Resistance in Mexico in the 1940s’, *Jl Latin Amer. Studies*, xxxvii (2005); Smith, *Pistoleros and Popular Movements*, ch. 7; Paul Gillingham, ‘Ambiguous Missionaries: Rural Teachers and State Facades in Guerrero, 1930–1950’, *Mexican Studies / Estudios mexicanos*, xxii (2006), 357–8; Gillingham, ‘Force and Consent in Mexican Provincial Politics’, ch. 5.

monopolized public revenues, absorbing 90 per cent of the budget in the later 1940s and 1950s;<sup>23</sup> but that budget, some 6.9 per cent of GDP in 1950, was low by standards either comparative (the rest of Latin America) or theoretical (one development economist recommends a minimum appropriation of 20 per cent of GDP for any state to function).<sup>24</sup> As late as 1985 the government would prove incapable of formulating a reliable rural property census.<sup>25</sup> The Mexican state — to continue with questionable biological metaphors — was less leviathan than pufferfish, jinking from side to side, desperately inflating itself to look bigger and meaner than it ever really was.<sup>26</sup> This article consequently explores a different line of argument, revising theories of 'intelligent design' in favour of a more evolutionary genesis for Mexico's peculiar political system — an evolutionary origin in which popular inputs and vetoes (in both Mexico City and the provinces) constituted significant selective pressures. To do so it examines Mexican politics from village councils to the presidency during the critical transition period of the 1940s, when revolutionary state gave way to Mexico's peculiar developmentalist authoritarianism. Maximino's career constitutes a useful starting point for this hypothesis, for Maximino was the archetype of the unaccountable elite player, autonomous to the point of recklessness. If his career was subject to the public censure of collective protest, whose was not?

The outlines of Maximino's biography are well known. He was the eldest member of the numerous Ávila Camacho clan from Teziutlán, a market town in the Sierra Norte of the central state of Puebla; when the revolution came he and his brothers joined the Constitutionals and rose steadily through the ranks. His father was a muleteer, a profession whose lessons in mobility, risk-taking and entrepreneurship may well have favoured family success in revolution, for the Ávila Camacho brothers, like other

<sup>23</sup> González Casanova, *Democracy in Mexico*, 25.

<sup>24</sup> Instituto Nacional de Estadística Geografía e Informática (INEGI), *Estadísticas históricas de México*, CD-ROM (Mexico City, 2000); W. Arthur Lewis, *Development Planning: The Essentials of Economic Policy* (New York, 1966), 115–16.

<sup>25</sup> Raymond Craib, *Cartographic Mexico: A History of State Fixations and Fugitive Landscapes* (Durham, NC, 2004), 1–2.

<sup>26</sup> For a sceptical assessment of Mexican state capacities, see Alan Knight, 'The Weight of the State in Modern Mexico', in James Dunkerley (ed.), *Studies in the Formation of the Nation-State in Latin America* (London, 2002).

muleteers' children or siblings — Emiliano Zapata, Venustiano Carranza, Doña Maria de la O in Guerrero, Adalberto Tejeda in Veracruz — emerged as leaders during the armed revolution and the ensuing period of violent, fraudulent and competitive mass politics that a participant observer dubbed the 'real gunman's democracy'.<sup>27</sup> By the late 1920s Maximino was a military zone commander, whose tenure in southern Zacatecas and northern Jalisco during the Catholic counter-revolution of the *Cristiada* allowed him to make his fortune: he sold arms to the rebels, shipped railroad cars full of booty back to Mexico City and founded an extensive cattle industry on the basis of expropriated livestock.<sup>28</sup> When Maximino's 51st Regiment was quartered in Nochistlán, Zacatecas, 'they left behind them', the town historian remembered, 'destruction and misery in the hamlets; they shipped vast herds of cattle to the markets of Aguascalientes and the Encarnación de Díaz in Mexico City; they burned the houses and stole the harvests, sending a wave of poverty and orphanhood'.<sup>29</sup> Posted to command in his home state, Puebla, he forged a powerful cross-class coalition and took control of regional politics, getting himself elected governor in 1937 and forcing state congressmen to take oaths of personal loyalty to him alone.<sup>30</sup> Maximino Ávila Camacho became the most

<sup>27</sup> Any psychocultural explanation for muleteer families' tendencies to stand out in revolution should be complemented by an obvious Whiggish rationale. Successful muleteers were 'rising middle classes' par excellence, and hence subject to assorted incentives to dissent in the late Porfiriato; they were also well positioned to act as intermediaries between popular or indigenous rebels and the bourgeoisie, and their broad local knowledge could make them useful commanders. In an economy historically plagued by transport bottlenecks, muleteer social mobility and revolutionary potential was nothing new: characters as disparate as Pedro Romero, the colonial mining magnate, and José María Morelos, the independence leader, were also originally muleteers. Describing elections as 'verdaderamente democrática y pistoleril' is a classic 'Santosism'. Santos, *Memorias*, 255–6.

<sup>28</sup> David G. LaFrance, 'The Military as Political Actor (and More) in the Mexican Revolution: The Case of Puebla in the 1920s and 1930s' (paper presented at the 26th International Congress of the Latin American Studies Association, San Juan, Puerto Rico, Mar. 2006), 8–11.

<sup>29</sup> Pedro Rodríguez Lozano, *Ofrenda: Geografía, Historia, Hechos, Costumbres y Tradiciones del Municipio de Nochistlán, Zacatecas* (Zacatecas, 1984), 307. I am grateful to Ben Fallaw for this and other data on Maximino's revolutionary career.

<sup>30</sup> Although this swearing of fealty has a certain resonance with contemporary European dictatorships, it was more probably inspired by a powerful Mexican tradition of clientelism sanctified by ritual oath-taking. Both future president Miguel Alemán and media owner Emilio Azcárraga took oaths of mutual loyalty and assistance to narrowly selected peer groups (H1920 and *el Club de los 22* respectively), promising, in the words of the *Club de los 22* founding document, 'a moral union of



powerful of the conservative bloc of governors of the late 1930s.<sup>31</sup> He not only established his family as one of the very few nationally significant *cacicazgos* of the mid century; but also tried vigorously to extend his power into neighbouring states, running an *avilacamachista* candidate for the governorship of Veracruz in 1940, undermining Guerrero's agrarian radical leader Nabor Ojeda and getting a sort of adopted brother, Edmundo Sánchez Cano, elected to the governorship of Oaxaca in 1944.<sup>32</sup>

In 1940 Manuel Ávila Camacho became president, and in September 1941 Maximino took over the Secretaría de Comunicaciones y Obras Públicas (SCOP). This was a takeover by tommy gun: when Maximino's more diplomatic arts failed him he led a large body of armed supporters to the ministry building, where they forcibly ejected the sitting minister and his aides. Maximino, ensconced behind his new ministerial desk, then phoned his brother the president to inform him of the cabinet reshuffle.<sup>33</sup> He had coveted the post, and with reason. The SCOP was a central public office in terms of both political economy and intelligence — the power to decide the course of roads and the contractors who would build them was both politically influential and lucrative, 'probably the most lucrative post in the Mexican

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friendship which will serve in the future so that all this group triumphs in life'. It was not verbiage: 20 per cent of Alemán's law class — the source of H1920 — obtained high office during his term as president; while *el Club de los 22*, which held monthly meetings from 1957 until the mid 1970s, included Azcárraga, Rómulo O'Farrill, Othón Veléz Jr and Miguel Alemán Jr. At a less committed level, usage of *hermano* constitutes a similar claim to artificial kinship. The instrumental use of kinship terminology has been analysed by numerous anthropologists, notably Maurice Bloch. Niblo, *Mexico in the 1940s*, 6; Krauze, *La presidencia imperial*, 88; Claudia Fernández and Andrew Paxman, *El Tigre: Emilio Azcárraga y su imperio Televisa* (Mexico City, 2000), 67; Peter H. Smith, 'Mexico since 1946: Dynamics of an Authoritarian Regime', in Leslie Bethell (ed.), *Mexico since Independence* (Cambridge, 1991), 337–52; Maurice Bloch, 'The Moral and Tactical Meaning of Kinship Terms', *Man*, new ser., vi (1971).

<sup>31</sup> Wil Pansters, *Politics and Power in Puebla: The Political History of a Mexican State, 1937–1987* (Amsterdam, 1990), 48–52; Santos, *Memorias*, 647.

<sup>32</sup> PS-2 to Gobernación, 19 Feb. 1940: AGN, DGIPS, 78/5; Nabor Ojeda to Maximino Ávila Camacho, 4 Mar. 1942: AGN, Fondo Presidente Manuel Ávila Camacho, 515.1/5; Octavio Aguilar de la Parra, *Mi tío, el cacique . . . ensayo político anecdótico* (Mexico City, 1985), 66–7.

<sup>33</sup> Alejandro Quintana, "'With a Gun in his Hand": Maximino Ávila Camacho and the 1941 Challenge to Presidentialism' (paper presented at the 121st Annual Meeting of the American Historical Association, Atlanta, Jan. 2007), 9–10.

Government',<sup>34</sup> while control of the telephone and telegraph systems gave the minister extraordinary access to the inner workings of both provincial and national politics.<sup>35</sup> The post placed Maximino at the table with the revolutionary generals across the ideological spectrum — from Adrián Castrejón, Miguel Henríquez Guzmán and Dámaso Cárdenas on the left to Juan Andreu Almazán and Román Yocupicio on the right — who ran the country's construction businesses, and in a position of ascendancy over the regional power brokers competing for federal highways as the road-building boom of the mid century began.<sup>36</sup> His graft was legendary; Maximino was 'completely open about [it]', and it was 'public knowledge that he [was] collecting 10 per cent' on all SCOP contracts.<sup>37</sup> Yet he was more than a passive recipient of pay-offs, and from his bases in Puebla and the ministry Maximino used distinctly hard-edged tactics to build a business empire that included real estate, sugar, cattle, newspapers, film, night clubs, horseracing and the bullfight. He was also a figurehead of the more conservative members of the party, whose presidential ambitions for 1946 were common knowledge from the very beginnings of the Ávila Camacho administration. But he had also made numerous and bitter enemies, ranging from the *cardenistas* to Miguel Alemán, whom he threatened to kill in the turbulent manoeuvrings of the presidential succession.<sup>38</sup> Shortly after, however, Maximino attended one of those most PRIísta of functions, a political banquet in Atlixco, a mill town in the industrial heartland of Puebla. There, on 17 February 1945, he ate well and died: an abrupt and mysterious

<sup>34</sup> Ray to the Secretary of State, 25 May 1943: NARG, 812.00/32156.

<sup>35</sup> 'Mújica was . . . the minister of Communications and Public Works, which meant that he had us very well watched by telegraph and telephone': Santos, *Memorias*, 647, 747.

<sup>36</sup> An understudied process, whose impacts at macro and micro levels seem to have been comparable to those of the late nineteenth-century railway boom.

<sup>37</sup> The similarities between Maximino and Raúl, brother to President Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988–94) are noteworthy. It has been suggested that Manuel's image of distance from Maximino was mainly that, an image; the intertwining of the Salinas brothers' businesses is rumoured but unproven. Gibson to State, 7 Apr. 1943: NARG, 812.00/32136; Julia Preston and Samuel Dillon, *Opening Mexico: The Making of a Democracy* (New York, 2004), 302.

<sup>38</sup> Medina, *Civilismo y modernización del autoritarismo*, 15–16; PS-2 to Gobernación, 29 Jan. 1940: AGN, DGIPS, 78/5; Santos, *Memorias*, 834–6.

end that has provoked lasting speculation by the conspiratorially minded.<sup>39</sup>

Maximino's career in the bullfight is less well known, but likewise violent, clientelist and influential. He was what we now call an *aficionado práctico*, one of the aspiring gentlemen amateurs who dabble in fighting bulls and cows in the testing grounds of the stock farms and in festivals, harvesting significant social capital. He seems to have preferred *rejoneo*, the leading and killing of a bull from horseback.<sup>40</sup> (Although, according to Santos, the founder of a dynasty of *rejoneadores*, he did this 'perfectly badly'.)<sup>41</sup> He was also a *ganadero*, a stockbreeder, who owned several ranches in Puebla and in Veracruz. And he was, finally, a major player in the big business of the Mexico City bullfight. In 1941 he had himself 'invited' into a 50 per cent partnership with Carcho Peralta, who ran the city's main bullring, El Toreo; in 1942, Maximino recalled, he was able to 'liquidate' that partnership.<sup>42</sup> The Peralta family recalled things in less neutral terms; Maximino, initially denied full ownership, sent gunmen after his partner, who prudently went to Brazil for several months (remembering the fate of the Puebla impresario Jesús Cienfuegos, who refused similar offers and was stabbed to death on a street corner; his bullring had subsequently been acquired by Maximino). Maximino took over both the Peralta ranch in Puebla and the Mexico City bullring.<sup>43</sup> He promiscuously rigged the careers of impresarios, bullfighters and stockbreeders, forcing the departure of the great manager Doctor Gaona and pushing 'Armillita', the leading Mexican matador of

<sup>39</sup> Medina, *Civilismo y modernización del autoritarismo*, 22; Krauze, *La presidencia imperial*, 43; Sergio H. Peralta Sandoval, *Hotel Regis: historia de una época* (Mexico City, 1996), 66.

<sup>40</sup> He also dabbled in *charrería*, the rope tricks performed in elaborate costume with 'normal', as opposed to fighting, bulls, and had himself filmed in *charro* dress for a US documentary: Andrew Paxman, 'The Mexican Film Monopoly of the 1940s: How It Arose and Why It Was Permitted' (paper presented at the 27th International Congress of the Latin American Studies Association, Montreal, Sept. 2007), 13.

<sup>41</sup> Failing, when Santos saw him, to plant *rejones* (short barbed spears) or to kill the bull: Santos, *Memorias*, 680–1.

<sup>42</sup> *La Prensa*, 21 May 1943.

<sup>43</sup> Peralta Sandoval, *Hotel Regis*, 61–6; Paxman, 'Mexican Film Monopoly of the 1940s', 13. As the US embassy heard it, Maximino 'forced Peralta to give him a small share in the bullring and then kicked him out completely without the payment of any money whatsoever'. Ray to the Secretary of State, 25 May 1943: NARG, 812.00/32156.

the epoch, into near-retirement.<sup>44</sup> Impresarios are rarely liked in the bullfight, where what Michael Herzfeld has called structural nostalgia (that 'collective representation of an Edenic order — a time before time — in which the balanced perfection of social relations has not yet suffered the decay that affects everything human') tends to generate in aficionados enduring feelings of decline, of soldiering on as perpetually hard-done-by dupes of corruption.<sup>45</sup> Maximino was not just the key power broker in the bullfight; he was also a serial meddler, to the detriment of what puny meritocracy the bullfighting community might have contained; for all his posturing, he seemed more interested in social climbing than in the bulls themselves, a *nouveau riche* trying to break into the closest thing Mexico had to a landed aristocracy; and he illegally hiked up ticket prices (capped by the city government) through an extensive network of ticket touts.<sup>46</sup> All of this made Maximino unpopular across the entire class spectrum of the bullfight. Yet impresarios can survive extraordinary levels of unpopularity; and in the mid 1940s Maximino was sufficiently central to the business for Neguib Simón, the Lebanese entrepreneur who built the Monumental Plaza México, to propose that the new ring (then and now the world's largest) be named the Plaza Maximino Ávila Camacho.<sup>47</sup>

For bullfight historians, however, Maximino remains best known for his role in the extraordinary events of 1 August 1943, when six bulls from one of his own ranches — El Rodeo — were billed for a *novillada*, one of the apprentice bullfights where aspiring bullfighters learn their trade killing smaller, three-year-old animals. The *novillada* was held in his plaza, El Toreo, the concrete and metal bullring that stood on the site of today's Palacio de Hierro department store in the Mexico City neighbourhood of La Condesa. The ring was the greatest in the Americas: built in the last years of the Porfiriato, it seated 23,000 spectators, and in these glory days of Mexican bullfighting, was regularly filled to

<sup>44</sup> Carlos Septién García, *Crónicas taurinas* (Querétaro, 1991), 76; Krauze, *La presidencia imperial*, 42; Roberto Blanco Moheno, *Jicaltepec* (Mexico City, 1973), 60.

<sup>45</sup> Michael Herzfeld, *Cultural Intimacy: Social Poetics in the Nation-State* (New York, 1997), 109.

<sup>46</sup> Niblo, *Mexico in the 1940s*, 284; Peralta Sandoval, *Hotel Regis*, 58.

<sup>47</sup> Only to be overruled by the president, Manuel Ávila Camacho: Raúl Luna, 'Arranca hoy la Temporada Grande en la Monumental', *El Universal*, 6 Nov. 2005.

capacity. Queues for tickets blocked the Saturday evening traffic, and on Sunday the plaza filled — could have filled twice over, said one journalist — to see three leading *novilleros*: Juan Estrada, Félix Briones and Luis Procuna. It might have been a good afternoon; the critics, prone as ever to swinging between abject despair and fanatical optimism, promised ‘a magnificent *novillada* with greatly attractive bulls and bullfighters’.<sup>48</sup> The bulls were in reality unknown quantities; it was the first time El Rodeo had sent any to Mexico City. The bullfighters, on the other hand, were promising and popular. Juan Estrada, after a long career as an apprentice, had done well in the provinces in 1942; Luis Procuna, on the verge of taking the *alternativa*, the bullfighter’s doctorate, had won the ‘Silver Ear’ and would become an important figure in the Mexican bullfight; Félix Briones came from a distinguished family of *toreros*. They were expected to push each other hard.<sup>49</sup>

But the *novillada* went dramatically wrong. The first bull was ‘so weedy that its appearance provoked general protest’, and it was sent back to the corrals.<sup>50</sup> The fourth, named ‘Valentón’ (Brave Boy), signally failed to live up to his name and was ordered to be returned to the corrals for refusing to charge. Valentón also refused to leave the ring (in the company of the tame steers kept for such setbacks) and after a lengthy chase around the ring was dispatched by a knife in the neck.<sup>51</sup> The fifth bull was ‘tiny’ and pacific, and by now outraged spectators were raining down cushions and anything else they could lay hands on, while some lit fires in the stands; consequently, Luis Procuna (whose turn it was), abandoned any attempt at leading the bull with the *muleta*, killed it as soon as he legally could, and took cover ringside from a rain of projectiles.<sup>52</sup> The sixth bull was similarly condemned by the public, who by now had run out of cushions and bottles and began dismantling the wooden barriers, seating and metal

<sup>48</sup> *Excelsior*, 1 Aug. 1943; *El Redondel*, 1 Aug. 1943.

<sup>49</sup> Estrada was likewise on the eve of his *alternativa*, but his career was derailed when the bull Collaritos wounded him seriously during the ceremony: Daniel Tapia, *Historia del torero*, i, *De Pedro Romero a ‘Manolete’* (Madrid, 1993), 441; Carlos Abella, *Historia del torero*, ii, *De Luis Miguel Dominguín a ‘El Cordobés’* (Madrid, 1993), 111–14, 144; José María de Cossío, *Los toros: tratado técnico e histórico*, 12 vols. (Madrid, 1943–97), iv, 387–8, 445, 659.

<sup>50</sup> *El Redondel*, 1 Aug. 1943.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*; *Excelsior*, 2 Aug. 1943.

<sup>52</sup> The *muleta* is the smaller red cloth, draped over a support and used to lead the bull in the third and final act.

billboards. Finally, the spectators rushed the *callejón* and, after Briones in turn had killed as quickly as possible, piled cushions, papers, clothes and pieces of wood onto the last bull to burn its corpse.<sup>53</sup> ‘From high up’, reported *Esto*’s correspondent, ‘where we found ourselves watching this explosion of base passions, we saw the horde join hands and form a chain to dance and ululate around the bonfire’.<sup>54</sup>

We might think this just another day in the office in the seemingly rowdy world of the bulls, a world founded, after all, on the consideration, performance and transcendence of violence. Ernest Hemingway, writing a decade earlier, clearly outlined the culturally accepted rights of the crowd to violent protest at any behaviour that might be classed fraudulent. ‘I believe firmly’, he held forth,

in the throwing of cushions of all weights, pieces of bread, oranges, vegetables, small dead animals of all sorts, including fish, and, if necessary, bottles provided they are not thrown at the bullfighters’ heads, and the occasional setting fire to a bull ring if a properly decorous protest has had no effect.<sup>55</sup>

The swagger is stereotypical; but violence did spill out of the ring on a relatively regular basis. When the cartoonist and aficionado Abel Quezada satirized a bullfighter in the sports paper *Ovaciones*, his victim took hired goons to the Café Tupinamba and beat up the paper’s bullfight reporter (Quezada reprinted the offending cartoon accompanied by his photo, ‘so that Sr Cañedo might recognize me’).<sup>56</sup> Carlos Arruza, one of Mexico’s leading matadors, never made it to the infamous 1 August bullfight; he started a ‘discussion’ with a driver en route and was stabbed twice.<sup>57</sup> Juan Silveti, ‘the Guanajuato Tiger’, had a secret policeman’s badge and a *muleta* embroidered with the slogan ‘Viva Calles’; he may have been the unnamed bullfighter whom José Vasconcelos accused of killing drivers ‘for fun’.<sup>58</sup> *Broncas* — crowd protests

<sup>53</sup> Ringside is the *callejón* (literally, ‘alleyway’) — the space for toreros, assistants, medics, journalists, managers and security men, in between the edge of the ring and the beginning of the stands. *La Lidia*, 6 Aug. 1943; *El Redondel*, 1 Aug. 1943; *Esto*, 3 Aug. 1943; *Excelsior*, 2 Aug. 1943.

<sup>54</sup> *Esto*, 3 Aug. 1943.

<sup>55</sup> Ernest Hemingway, *Death in the Afternoon* (1932; New York, 1960), 163, 188.

<sup>56</sup> *Ovaciones*, 1 Mar. 1950.

<sup>57</sup> *El Redondel*, 1 Aug. 1943.

<sup>58</sup> Plutarco Elías Calles (president, 1924–8) opposed the bullfight and oversaw a bloody counterinsurgency against Catholic rebels, making him, we imagine, an unpopular figure for bullfight aficionados. Silveti personnel file: AGN, DGIPS, 96/

involving jeers, whistles, thrown cushions and beer, and the odd scuffle — are a structural constant of the bullfight, and today even an occasional visitor to the Plaza México will quickly get to know the ritualized chants such as ‘uno, dos, tres, chinga su madre el juez’.<sup>59</sup> Some bullfighters were known for their ability to provoke *broncas*; thus the gifted but erratic matador Lorenzo Garza was nicknamed ‘the stormy petrel’ in testimony to the numerous and noisy protests he generated. Yet *broncas* were in the final analysis tame, ritualized performances of dissent, and — as in more serious affairs, such as bread riots or Luddite machine breaking — tended to work as instances of what Eric Hobsbawm dubbed ‘collective bargaining by riot’, in which the interactions of protesters and authorities were regulated by a clear set of mutually understood rules of conduct.<sup>60</sup>

Formally, it was Mexico City’s town hall that defined those rules by means of the clear-cut legalisms of the *reglamento taurino*, the social contract of the bullfight. The *reglamento* laid down a series of stiff penalties for aficionados in an attempt to enforce orderly, ‘civilized’ behaviour in the crowded stands. Alcohol was restricted to watery beer sold in paper cups; anyone who tried to smuggle in their own bottles was liable to arrest. Excesses of enthusiasm, such as jumping into the ring to try one’s luck with an improvised or smuggled *muleta*, carried a minimum of two days in jail; excesses of dissent, defined very broadly to encompass anything from swearing to hurling bottles or anything else that came to hand, were punishable by fines of up to 500 pesos and fifteen days in jail.<sup>61</sup> In return for accepting these restrictions the public was granted a lengthy bill of rights. The *reglamento* stretched to 109 articles covering sixty-three pages, specifying in painstaking detail the obligations of the other actors in the

(n. 58 cont.)

2-1/131/852; Tadeo Alcina, ‘La publicidad en el vestido de torear’, *Matador*, v (Aug. 2000), 14; José Vasconcelos, *Obras completas*, 4 vols. (Mexico City, 1957–61), ii, 199.

<sup>59</sup> An incitement to maternal incest, addressed to the official in charge of the bullfight, *el juez* (the judge).

<sup>60</sup> The use of machine wrecking as a negotiating tactic was ‘a traditional and established part of industrial conflict in the period of the domestic and manufacturing system, and the early stages of factory and mine . . . Wrecking was simply a technique of trade unionism’: Eric J. Hobsbawm, ‘The Machine Breakers’, *Past and Present*, no. 1 (Feb. 1952), 58–9.

<sup>61</sup> Articles 89, 90, 94: *Reglamento taurino México D.F.* (Mexico City, 1941), 48–9.

plaza, namely bullfighters, impresarios, stockbreeders and public authorities. These obligations were also enforced by severe penalties. Thus bulls had to pass a test of bravery, defined as charging the horseback *picador* three times; if they did not, they were substituted; and should the substitutes likewise fail that test then the stockbreeder would be fined heavily and barred for the rest of the season.<sup>62</sup>

The aim of the *reglamento* was to realize the platonic ideal of a bullfight: one in which a knowledgeable, deferential public experienced visceral, but also intellectual and aesthetic, pleasure in witnessing a man earning the right to kill a bull by exposing himself to that bull's real threat, and managing that threat with inventiveness, grace and power. But the bullfight rarely worked so smoothly. It was a fragile spectacle, a utopian struggle easily derailed by ill fortune — a much-anticipated bull breaking a horn, for example. And it was also a deeply corrupt spectacle, because the incentives to manipulation and fraud were powerful, and a whole series of subterfuges (from breeding small, docile animals to shaving their horns) could be used to reduce the genuine danger that lay at the core of the bullfight. The bullfight was, as a result, enveloped in twin discourses of honour — the *pundonor* (integrity) of the men, the *nobleza* (nobility), of the bulls — and corruption. The discourse of corruption in the bullfight was so ubiquitous that it cropped up, of all places, on the back of the *reglamento* itself, where a cartoon advert for Ambassador cigarettes portrayed a fat and relaxed matador chasing a terrified bull from the safety of a tank. The encyclopaedic detail of the *reglamento* was itself an expression of the profound tensions between the interests of aficionados and those who staged the bullfight; and the bullring was, as a consequence of that tension, the scene of continual bargaining as to what those aficionados would accept. For all the regulations, the *bronca* remained the mechanism by which crowds conducted that bargaining. This was common knowledge; as one critic put it, 'now and for ever, cushion-hurling is the only inoffensive means that the bullfight publics of the world have possessed and continues to possess to manifest their indignation'.<sup>63</sup> 'Inoffensive' was an exaggeration,

<sup>62</sup> Articles 60, 100: *Reglamento taurino*, 30, 53.

<sup>63</sup> *El Universal*, 20 Jan. 1947.



for hurling abuse and objects at a near-riotous pitch was relatively frequent and relatively low risk for the public, and such protests were taken by both sides as part of the formal and informal rules of the bullfight.

The events of 1 August 1943 — ‘an unprecedented disturbance’, ‘nothing the like of which had been seen before’, according to the journalists present — breached these rules in three key areas.<sup>64</sup> The physical destruction of anything that could be destroyed in the bullring was exceptional; it happened but once or twice a generation. Lighting small fires — like flares in contemporary football crowds — was common enough practice, unthreatening in concrete stands and generally dealt with by the attending firemen without too much fuss.<sup>65</sup> (The story had been different in the days of wooden structures: one *bronca*, that of 13 January 1902 in Puebla, caused a fire which totally destroyed the plaza, while another, that of late 1896, partially destroyed the Bucareli ring in Mexico City.)<sup>66</sup> Tearing down metal laminate billboards and wooden rails was a distinctly different order of violence. Yet more significantly, the incineration of the sixth bull’s corpse was an egregious breach of the tacit pact of respect between spectators and sacrificial animal. Finally, the slogans chanted went outside the immediate confines of the *corrida* to target the political system and one of its main actors — Maximino Ávila Camacho. The unexpected and uncontrollable nature of the crowd’s action was demonstrated by the reaction of the police detachment posted inside the plaza, ready, under normal conditions, to maintain basic order with a few beatings and arrests. The police in the bullring were not shy in using their powers. During one of Lorenzo Garza’s more dreadful afternoons they arrested an aficionado who hit him with a cushion, and then the matador himself; during the exceptional *bronca* of 12 July 1925 they had opened fire on the crowd, leaving some thirty wounded.<sup>67</sup> But in 1943, overwhelmed, they did nothing at all; one policeman was even reported to have gleefully joined in

<sup>64</sup> *Esto*, 3 Aug. 1943. ‘It’s been a long time’, opined *El Redondel*, ‘since we’ve seen a *bronca* like this’: *El Redondel*, 1 Aug. 1943.

<sup>65</sup> *Excelsior*, 2 Aug. 1943; *El Universal*, 20 Jan. 1947.

<sup>66</sup> Cossío, *Los toros*, iv, 156; José Francisco Coello, ‘Ora Ponciano’, *Matador*, iii (Aug. 1998), 17.

<sup>67</sup> AGN, DGIPS, 007/02/100; *El Universal*, 20 Jan. 1947; 13 July 1925.

the havoc.<sup>68</sup> This was not a *bronca taurina*, but rather a profoundly political protest.

It was not explicitly reported as such by the mainstream metropolitan press, which was subject to increasingly efficient governmental control through elite ownership, wartime censorship, government advertising contracts and PIPSA, the state company that held a monopoly on newsprint. '*El Apretado*', boasted one short-lived satirical offering of the time, 'will be as Catholic and Mexican a newspaper as can be. Catholic because it will come out when God and the Government Paper Monopoly permit. Mexican because you'll see the trouble we'll cause — or they'll cause us'.<sup>69</sup> Neither of the main broadsheet newspapers, *Excélsior* and *El Universal*, shied away from reporting the riot; but they gutted it of any political message by neither identifying the stock-breeder as Maximino nor quoting the crowd's insults (*La Prensa* claimed, rather, that Maximino was not the breeder at all).<sup>70</sup> Even some of the less well-monitored bullfight papers downplayed the significance of the rioting crowd by painting its members as irrational, 'uncivilized' actors, uniformly plebeian and, by clear implication — conveyed through unambiguous word selection — 'Indian'. 'The multitude', reported 'Juan de Triana', 'plumbed the depths of barbarity, wholly out of control'; they 'ululated savagely' as, 'drunk with joy', they vandalized the bullring.<sup>71</sup> The crowd, wrote 'Flamenquillo', was 'tainted with barbarism'.<sup>72</sup>

Such accounts conformed to a long tradition of state-supporting writers whose rhetorical strategies carefully delegitimize — frequently, though not invariably, through depoliticizing — the behaviour of rioters and rebels. As George Rudé observed, 'such terms as "la canaille", "la dernière plèbe", "bandits", and "brigands" have been commonly applied to the participants in [rioting crowds] up to the present day'.<sup>73</sup> The insurgents of 1810 in Mexico were 'systematically' branded bandits by their royalist opponents; rebels in the north of Guerrero in the mid 1940s suffered the same fate; and the carefully organized Zapatista rebellion of January 1994 was reported by the *Washington Post*

<sup>68</sup> *La Lidia*, 6 Aug. 1943; *El Redondel*, 1 Aug. 1943; *Excélsior*, 2 Aug. 1943.

<sup>69</sup> *El Apretado*, 19 May 1951.

<sup>70</sup> *Excélsior*, 2 Aug. 1943; *El Universal*, 2 Aug. 1943.

<sup>71</sup> *Esto*, 3 Aug. 1943.

<sup>72</sup> *La Prensa*, 2 Aug. 1943.

<sup>73</sup> George Rudé, *The Crowd in the French Revolution* (1959; Oxford, 1977), 2–3.

under the headline 'Indians Rampage in Southeast Mexico'.<sup>74</sup> Angry urban crowds in the 1940s and 1950s faced slightly different repertoires of misrepresentation. Immune to depiction as 'bandits' or 'cattle rustlers', their numbers were systematically underreported; thus when the students of the Instituto Politécnico Nacional went on strike in 1950 they were written off as a tiny minority of three hundred, when demonstrators were counted in thousands by the secret police.<sup>75</sup> Those whose existence was acknowledged were simultaneously delegitimized, as either apolitical or overly political: whether as the foot soldiers of ambitious and unscrupulous elite opportunists, or — with increasing frequency from the late 1940s onwards — as communists and fifth columnists, pawns in a Soviet game of continental domination.<sup>76</sup> ('We are not communists', a placard in one union demonstration read, 'we are hungry'.)<sup>77</sup> In the case of Maximino's bulls, the first option was followed, and the riot as a political act was simply ignored.

Yet even depoliticized accounts of the *novillada* let us glimpse a different and very contradictory picture between their lines. The crowd's anger was not in the least undirected or irrational; it was catalysed by the bulls, but it was volubly focused on their breeder, Maximino Ávila Camacho, and his political activities. The bulls, opined *La Prensa*, were in reality neither smaller nor more cowardly than those of other breeders.<sup>78</sup> Certainly the (small) size and (underwhelming) aggression of bulls was a constant criticism of the time; substandard bulls were written off as 'calves', 'beetles' or 'little lead bulls' on a regular basis. Such criticism went beyond the chronicles of purists such as Alfonso de Icaza and entered the ring in well-coordinated protests; before one *corrida* in the early 1940s a group of protesters occupied the ring and unfurled a large

<sup>74</sup> Alan Knight, *Mexico: The Colonial Era* (Cambridge, 2002), 309; *Excelsior*, 24 Sept. 1947; *Washington Post*, 2 Jan. 1994.

<sup>75</sup> Orlando Delgado de Garay to DGIPS, 26 May 1950: AGN, DGIPS, 104/Orlando Delgado de Garay.

<sup>76</sup> 'I have had access to certain documents (as bizarre as the times in which we live) which clearly prove the existence, in Mexico and the rest of the continent, of an organized and dangerous Soviet fifth column': Carlos Denegri, *Excelsior*, 19 Aug. 1948.

<sup>77</sup> One of many such observations. 'In Mexico', a speaker at the same rally noted, 'Anyone who tells the truth is called a Communist'. 'Summary of Diverse Reports . . . on the Union Demonstration of 21 August 1948': AGN, DGIPS, 111/2-1/260/82.

<sup>78</sup> *La Prensa*, 2 Aug. 1943.

banner reading ‘The last lot of calves from Llaguno’.<sup>79</sup> Crowds repeatedly disappointed by the major breeder Don Antonio Llaguno would, all other factors being equal, have much more reason to riot than a crowd judging a minor stock farm’s bulls for the first time. Yet more significantly — and utterly whitewashed out of all press accounts of the riot — this particular bullfight was officially a test for Maximino’s stock farm.<sup>80</sup> To supply bulls to the Mexico City bullrings a breeder was required by law to send two consignments of bulls to *novilladas de prueba*, ‘testing fights’, after which they would be licensed by city authorities as *ganaderías de cartel*, topflight stock farms.<sup>81</sup> This was Maximino’s first such test, publicly announced as such; the public took it as their chance, cloaked in anonymity and the safety of numbers, to reject his ambitions in bullring, society and politics. Maximino was the target of insults from the very beginning of the bullfight, with the public ‘only waiting for any excuse to go back to protesting’; in the immediate aftermath the ring managers convened a panicky, impromptu press conference to deny that Maximino had anything to do with the affair, claiming that he had actually just sold the stock farm in question.<sup>82</sup> In so doing, of course, they only confirmed the general’s role as the central object of the crowd’s rage, and that crowd’s success in blackballing his application for membership of the aristocracy of the bullfight, the *ganaderos de cartel*.

If the target of the riot was clearly Maximino, the rioters equally clearly came from a broad spectrum of the classes present, which formed, in turn, a useful sample of Mexico City society. It was a large sample: 23,000 people out of a population of some 1.8 million.<sup>83</sup> It was also a roughly representative sample, for bullfights were extremely popular in the 1940s. Families would treat themselves to tickets on Sunday and then fast on Monday to pay, Rodolfo Usigli wrote, making ‘bread as well as circuses’ a positive aspiration.<sup>84</sup> Upper and middle classes turned out in force, trying to live Miguel Alemán’s dream ‘that every Mexican could have a

<sup>79</sup> *El Redondel*, 23 Mar. 1941; *Matador*, iv (May 1999), 9.

<sup>80</sup> *Excélsior*, 1 Aug. 1943.

<sup>81</sup> *Reglamento taurino*, 26–7.

<sup>82</sup> *Esto*, 3 Aug. 1943; *Excélsior*, 2 Aug. 1943; *La Lidia*, 6 Aug. 1943.

<sup>83</sup> INEGI, *Estadísticas históricas de México*.

<sup>84</sup> Rodolfo Usigli, ‘Epílogo sobre la hipocresía del mexicano’ (1938), in Usigli, *Teatro Completo*, iii, 474–5.

Cadillac, a cigar and a ticket to the bulls'.<sup>85</sup> The Sunday that the presidency passed from Lázaro Cárdenas to Manuel Ávila Camacho was marked by a *corrida* attended by the diplomatic corps and Vice-President Wallace of the United States; the following year Cantinflas and the impresario led a troupe of Hollywood stars around the ring.<sup>86</sup> Gobernación spies made the most of their aura of power by requesting free season tickets.<sup>87</sup> Yet an afternoon at the bulls was not necessarily expensive. While the bullring was a place for socialites to be seen, tickets were also cheap enough to be within the reach of the urban poor; thus Carlos Fuentes's fictional aficionados in the upper seats include a taxi driver, two workers and one unemployed hooligan (who spend a lacklustre *corrida* drinking, passing around a dead snake, and throwing bags of urine on the spectators below).<sup>88</sup>

How do we know who rioted on that August afternoon? We lack tax registers or police records to classify the public in El Toreo; but we have a rough and ready equivalent in the seating plan of the bullring. The space of a *plaza de toros* is carefully and quite sensitively divided by class (and to a lesser extent culture) both vertically and horizontally.<sup>89</sup> Seats rise in price as they descend from the gods of *tendido general* towards the ringside *barreras*; they are also more expensive in *sombra*, the half of the ring deemed to fall in shadow during the bullfight, than they are in *sol*. Seats in *sombra* are not just cooler (rarely a key consideration in the Mexico City autumn and winter); they are also closer to where the matadors cluster, where most of the action is likely to happen, and where the elites themselves congregate. Thus when the crooner Agustín Lara sang 'Silverio, when you're fighting/I wouldn't swap my *barrera de sol* for a throne' he was claiming a complex, populist identity, prosperous yet in touch with the more plebeian sectors of the public.<sup>90</sup> The participants in the El Toreo riot were identified

<sup>85</sup> Krauze, *La presidencia imperial*, 100.

<sup>86</sup> Peralta Sandoval, *Hotel Regis*, 58–60.

<sup>87</sup> Multiple requests: AGN, DGIPS, 2030A.

<sup>88</sup> Carlos Fuentes, *La región más transparente* (Mexico City, 1996), 197–9.

<sup>89</sup> The bullfight can serve, as Bill Beezley puts it in his study of late nineteenth-century culture, as 'a metaphor for Mexican society'. By the 1940s, though, it is a more involved metaphor than his period's stark division of shady elites and sunny *pueblo* might suggest. William H. Beezley, *Judas at the Jockey Club and Other Episodes of Porfirian Mexico* (Lincoln, Nebr., 1987), 5–6, 14–17.

<sup>90</sup> 'Silverio, cuando toreas / No cambio por un trono / Mi barrera de sol': Agustín Lara, 'Silverio Pérez'. This bid for a popular identity failed, however, and the public

(cont. on p. 166)

as coming not just from the upper echelons of *sol general*, where the tickets were cheapest; they came, all the writers concurred, from *sombra* too. It was, according to *El Redondel*, a cushion hurled from *sombra* that began the escalation from *bronca* towards riot. And while some spectators left, plenty — including ‘ladies’ — stayed, because they were quite clearly enjoying themselves. ‘The shouts’, said *Esto* about the riot’s peak, ‘were no longer of rage, but of morbid joy . . . by now nobody was thinking of the bulls, but of causing the most damage possible . . . *la gente* were not leaving. They were enjoying it, like the others’. The use of ‘others’ is almost anthropological, opposed quite deliberately to *la gente*, which is a contraction of *la gente decente*, ‘the decent folk’, a longstanding code for the middle classes and above.<sup>91</sup> Other landmark *broncas* had been quite clearly class segregated: thus the main actors in the 1925 riot were a militant group from the cheap seats in *sol general*.<sup>92</sup> The 1943 El Toreo riot was different in this too; and an hour after the death of the last bull spectators of all classes remained, hugely excited, in the ring by the bull’s smouldering corpse.<sup>93</sup> The crowd protest had become one of what James Scott calls ‘those rare moments of political electricity when . . . the hidden transcript is spoken directly and publicly in the teeth of power’.<sup>94</sup> That transcript of power was not, as we shall see below, as hidden in mid-century Mexico as it was in Scott’s (generally more repressive) case study societies; its proclamation generated, nonetheless, like reactions, namely the ‘personal release, satisfaction, pride and elation’ which shine through the press coverage.<sup>95</sup>

The crowd’s political defiance was witnessed, elaborated and disseminated far beyond the plaza by one of the bullfight reporters, ‘Tío Carlos’: ‘Uncle Charlie’. He had good reason to be interested by their protest, for lurking behind the avuncular byline was Carlos Septién García, an influential journalist and

(n. 90 cont.)

barracked Lara and his girlfriend, María Félix, until they gave up going to the bulls: María Félix, *María Félix: todas mis guerras* (Mexico City, 1993), 80.

<sup>91</sup> *Esto*, 3 Aug. 1943. Theirs was not the only report to stress the participation of *la gente decente*: see also *La Prensa*, 2 Aug. 1943.

<sup>92</sup> *El Universal*, 13 July 1925.

<sup>93</sup> *La Lidia*, 6 Aug. 1943; *El Redondel*, 1 Aug. 1943; *Esto* 3 Aug. 1943.

<sup>94</sup> James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, 1990), p. xiii.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 208.

prominent member of Mexico's embryonic Christian Democrat opposition, the Partido de Acción Nacional (PAN). He founded the PAN's magazine, *La Nación*; he also ran for congress twice. Tío Carlos's review of the 1 August *novillada* took the unusual form of an open letter from the barbecued sixth bull to 'mi General', Maximino Ávila Camacho. This letter adroitly used Maximino's bulls as a metaphor for ordinary Mexicans confronting the economic hardship and political corruption of the early 1940s. The bulls were, it said, undersized and somewhat timid, but this was because they lacked food on Maximino's ranch and had to queue and jostle for what little there was. The bulls had not complained, he continued, as they realized their minimal importance in the scheme of things when set alongside the business of public works and multi-million peso property deals; but they had hoped — given their illustrious owner — to be spared excessive cruelty. When burned in the heart of a rioting mob the bull had realized, he continued, that Maximino was actually the cause and target of the abuse; that he, the bull, was a scapegoat; and that the spectators who danced around his body were making a political protest. He concluded that the bull would like to be exonerated by a press statement along the lines of

The management of El Toreo, in the light of the unjust sacrifice of the sixth bull of Sunday's fight . . . clarifies that El Rodeo's bulls do not own two hundred suits in different colours; neither have they bought buildings for millions of pesos, neither are they individuals who have tyrannized the *toreros*, breeders and businessmen of the bullfight, neither are they the ones who run the ticket touts. Much less are the aforementioned animals the ones responsible for the high cost of living, neither have they made their obscene fortunes sheltering behind any state of emergency that there may have been down on the farm. None of them had in life aspirations to be a creole sultan, nor did they offend anyone with bewildering displays of luxury or wealth.<sup>96</sup>

Tío Carlos was a forthright and darkly funny writer, but he was not wholly original. Maximino's lavish spending — reminiscent of the Medici but, snobs averred, lacking their good taste — was a staple of gossip; a union leader, reviewing Maximino's wealth, likewise referred to the two hundred silk suits.<sup>97</sup> Mocking Maximino was 'one of the favourite diversions in conversation'

<sup>96</sup> Septién García, *Crónicas taurinas*, 75–8.

<sup>97</sup> Cited in Niblo, *Mexico in the 1940s*, 283. By his death they had become two thousand: *La Esfera*, Venezuela, 2 Feb. 1945, cited in Quintana, "With a Gun in his Hand", 31.

in contemporary Mexico City.<sup>98</sup> Maximino was not the only cabinet member under fire for corruption; the day before the bullfight the magazine *Hoy* published accusations of profiteering against the Secretary of the National Economy, Francisco Javier Gaxiola.<sup>99</sup> But such attacks resonated particularly powerfully in the late summer and early autumn of 1943, a hungry time in Mexico. The harvest of 1942 had been unusually poor; the main maize harvest of 1943 was not due until the autumn, and it was predicted to fall short of national consumption by up to 70,000 tons.<sup>100</sup> By that stage crowds were gathering in towns and cities across Mexico to demonstrate. In August 60,000 workers came together in the capital to make 'an urgent appeal to the Mexican Government to curb the rising cost of living'; there was 'actual hunger in the lower wage brackets'.<sup>101</sup> Subsistence pressure was believed to be behind the contemporary crime wave: arrests for theft in the city doubled, while banditry in the provinces made alarmists think of revolution.<sup>102</sup> In Morelos a small guerrilla movement, the Jaramillistas, issued a sweeping plan for national rebellion and went on to several shoot-outs with the army.<sup>103</sup> There had been food riots in Mexico City in January 1942 and in May 1943, and there would be, Ambassador Messersmith told President Roosevelt, 'economic and political disorder in this country if this corn shortage cannot be met . . . You know what can happen when people get hungry, and you know that such things can happen more easily in Mexico than in some other places'.<sup>104</sup> Food shortages, as in early modern Europe, concentrated popular attention on corruption, and on multiple stories of grain hoarding and price

<sup>98</sup> 'An example of the jokes told about him is one that he had bought the recently erupted volcano near Paricutin. When the speaker is asked why the purchase was made, the reply is that the general could not refrain from buying anything he thought would go up'. Ray to the Secretary of State, 25 May 1943: NARG, 812.00/32156.

<sup>99</sup> *Hoy*, 31 July 1943.

<sup>100</sup> Finley to State, 10 Sept. 1943: NARG, 812.00/32196.

<sup>101</sup> Summary of consular reports for Aug. 1943: NARG, 812.00/32195; 'Report of Conditions in Mexico from August 1 to September 15, 1943': NARG, 812.00/32198.

<sup>102</sup> Comparison of 1942 with 1939, from Pablo Piccato, 'Presuntos delinquentes, fuero común: Distrito Federal, 1901–2001' at <<http://www.columbia.edu/estadisticas/crimen/EstadisticasSigloXX.htm>>; Finley to State, 10 Sept. 1943: NARG, 812.00/32196.

<sup>103</sup> Padilla, *Rural Resistance in the Land of Zapata*, 90–105.

<sup>104</sup> Alfonso Taracena, *La vida en México bajo Ávila Camacho*, 2 vols. (Mexico City, 1976–7), i, 155–9, 431–4; Messersmith to Roosevelt, 23 Sept. 1943: NARG, 812.5018/49.



manipulation by the well connected. Maximino came to the fore in such stories. It was rumoured that he was responsible for increasing the price of maize, and he was actually found to be hoarding rice by the Ministry of National Economy.<sup>105</sup> He was believed to have been central to the ring rigging the Mexico City meat market, in which a monopoly created by presidential decree gave 'certain individuals' the ability to depress wholesale prices and inflate retail prices by artificially constricting supply; while the city's demand was a thousand animals a day, the monopolists allowed a maximum of five hundred to be slaughtered.<sup>106</sup> As a result of such stories, the speaker of Congress observed, Maximino was 'losing his popularity everywhere in Mexico' as 'people . . . turned from laughing at his antics to detesting him'.<sup>107</sup>

Against this backdrop of economistic popular resentment Maximino was simultaneously at the centre of a high political struggle which pitted him against the left-wing followers of ex-President Lázaro Cárdenas. He began manoeuvring to succeed his brother, whose term would end without prospect of re-election in 1946; he reportedly tried to have Cárdenas, now Minister of War, fired; meanwhile the state party was trying to manage the congressional mid-term elections, the first since the bloody, botched presidential contest of 1940. A cabinet reshuffle was rumoured; the 'political situation', wrote the US ambassador, was 'rather confused'.<sup>108</sup> Popular opinion, seemingly less confused, was summed up in a cartoon of the time. As a radio squawks out the yearly state of the nation address, promising 'a hand to hand fight to improve living standards', a man sleeps on the street, surrounded by bins and rats, wrapped in newspapers which advertise cabarets and horse races. In a second frame the presidential voice claims that 'in the last elections the political parties freely exercised their rights', while a gunman, labelled 'state party', perches on top of a ballot box and says 'I swear it!'.<sup>109</sup> At the centre of this interwoven critique of economic

<sup>105</sup> Niblo, *Mexico in the 1940s*, 285–6.

<sup>106</sup> IPS-47 and IPS-26 to Gobernación, 15 June 1944: AGN, DGIPS, 23/9. Maximino was a major player in the Mexico City slaughterhouse: Quintana, "'With a Gun in his Hand'" 19.

<sup>107</sup> Messersmith to State, 19 Aug. 1943: NARG, 812.00/32184.

<sup>108</sup> Luis Medina, *Del cardenismo al avilacamachismo* (Mexico City, 1978), 167–71; Messersmith to Bonsal, 31 Aug. 1943: NARG, 812.00/8-3143.

<sup>109</sup> 'El Informe', in *Mañana*, 18 Sept. 1943.

inequity and political corruption sat the figure (itself rather cartoonish) of Maximino Ávila Camacho.

In such a context it is perfectly possible that the El Toreo riot was in part a set-up, planned and detonated by elite rivals; but the riot's clear cross-class popularity and the vigour with which it spread makes such difficult-to-trace details of secondary significance. The salience of the angry crowd from both cheap and expensive seats who chanted slogans against Maximino Ávila Camacho, tore up their surroundings, invaded the ring and burned the sixth bull lies in their very existence and in their demonstrable influence. A crowd confronted a notoriously violent and largely unchecked national power broker who symbolized the flaws of the emerging political system. This confrontation left few archival traces, but remained well known to aficionados several generations later. It successfully ended Maximino's aspirations to join the aristocracy of the bullfight; it almost certainly contributed to his growing exclusion from the highest levels of politics. The following Monday the US embassy was reporting widespread rumours of Maximino's imminent political demise, amid 'growing signs of dissatisfaction in the lower strata, particularly in the urban districts'.<sup>110</sup> By the end of the month his position was, the ambassador reported, 'very much weaker'.<sup>111</sup>

This politics of popular protest takes us some way from the low or no resistance society of the corporatist literature: the 'apolitical Mexico, which does not struggle in the civil sphere and lacks political power', the populace whose 'apathy' is 'relatively easy' to maintain with 'a subtle combination of co-optation and token responsiveness', exercised by a state enjoying 'uncontested dominance'.<sup>112</sup> As such the El Toreo riot raises numerous questions — of both methodology and interpretation — of which the most salient are where might we best look for such popular urban protests? How often did they occur? What provoked them? How were

<sup>110</sup> Finley to State, 4 Aug. 1943: NARG, 812.00/32180.

<sup>111</sup> Messersmith to Bonsal, 31 Aug. 1943: NARG, 812.00/8-3143.

<sup>112</sup> González Casanova, *Democracy in Mexico*, 120; Evelyn P. Stevens, 'Protest Movement in an Authoritarian Regime: The Mexican Case', *Comparative Politics*, vii (1975), 376; Richard S. Weinert, 'Introduction', in Reyna and Weinert (eds.), *Authoritarianism in Mexico*, p. xiii; Roderic Ai Camp, *Politics in Mexico* (Oxford, 1993), 12.

they used by rival elite factions? And to what extent did these angry, airbrushed-out crowds shape the early PRIista state?

My hypothesis is that popular protests like the El Toreo riot took place in a limbo between the well-publicized, set-piece strikes of railwaymen, doctors and students and the less visible (but now much sought after) acts of everyday, 'weapons of the weak' style resistance; that they were large enough to have a (difficult to measure) impact on state and federal governments; and yet were small enough to slip through the (gaping) cracks of the post-revolutionary state's rudimentary historiography. Both traditional overviews of the 1940s and 1950s, such as the works of Luis Medina and Rafael Loyola Díaz, and some more specialist analyses of protest, such as Evelyn Stevens's *Protest and Response in Mexico*, draw heavily on the national broadsheet press while rightly signalling its subjection to close government control.<sup>113</sup> Yet even the paper regarded as most critical of the regime, *Excélsior*, was by the mid 1940s well tamed, its journalists blind to protests such as that of the collective farmers of Motul, Yucatán, who confronted a presidential tour with a banner saying 'we are dying of hunger'.<sup>114</sup> Urban protesters were particularly aware that the newspapers would write them out of history. In 1942 between six and ten thousand strikers from the Universidad Politécnico Nacional paraded past the major newspaper offices, fought a pitched battle with police and firemen, and announced, to large crowds in front of the presidential palace, that the press would not tell the truth and would call them a sparse handful of hired dupes.<sup>115</sup> If newspapers are the first draft of history, this was a particularly misleading first draft; and if we want insights into popular protest, Mexican broadsheets should be close to the last port of call. More rewarding are, in no particular order of preference: participant interviews; scurrilous memoirs; the provincial press (unreliable, partisan, muckraking but far less tightly controlled at this point than its metropolitan 'betters'); the sports papers (where Abel Quezada published scorching critiques of the government throughout the 1940s); and the sometimes diligent and observant reports of Gobernación's spies from Investigaciones Políticas y Sociales (the DGIPS).

<sup>113</sup> Kenneth F. Johnson, review of Evelyn P. Stevens, *Protest and Response in Mexico*, in *Hispanic Amer. Hist. Rev.*, lv (1975), 822–4.

<sup>114</sup> *Ovaciones*, 10 June 1950.

<sup>115</sup> PS-1 to DGIPS, 6 Mar. 1942: AGN, DGIPS, 23/8.

Such sources clearly reveal a different story about popular culture, unfolding a rich and continuing tradition of public protest whose frequency and significance to the government is clear in the strenuous efforts it made to monitor, control and pre-empt the politicization of crowds. In the aftermath of the 1948 devaluation of the peso, for example, agents fanned out across Mexico City to file daily reports of ethnographic detail on the public mood in the city markets; reactions to the critical state of the nation address that year, as the regime seemed to totter, were monitored on street corners and in cafés, cantinas, union and party headquarters, bus stations, stadiums, the department store Sanborns and the bar of the Hotel Regis.<sup>116</sup> All the cities' main cinemas were visited nightly by agents, who noted which newsreel sections caused whistling, booing or jeers and then had them cut. They were busy in August 1948: footage of President Alemán giving out diplomas to teachers was systematically whistled, a newsreel showing the Departamento del Distrito Federal's response to floods caused the mayor, Fernando Casas Alemán, to be chased from the Cine Alameda amid deafening boos, while the appearance of the president on screen in Pátzcuaro, Michoacán, caused such a hail of insults that the lights went up and the show was stopped.<sup>117</sup> While 1948 was admittedly a vintage year for opponents of the PRI, such energetic urban protests seem to have been frequent throughout the 1940s and early 1950s — the formative years of the PRIísta state.

What sparked popular protests? Each one had its specific trigger and rationale, which varied considerably. In 1940 a crowd stoned the US embassy during Vice-President Wallace's visit; in 1941 law and medical students dragged a mongrel labelled 'Roosevelt' through the streets and stoned the Ministry of Foreign Affairs; in 1947 the flowers President Truman laid at the monument to the *niños héroes* were allegedly hurled back on the US embassy's doorstep. In 1942 hundreds of market-goers rioted in La Merced, the main market in Mexico City, in protest at vendors who were setting high food prices. In 1943 a crowd seized a mill in the working-class neighbourhood of the Colonia, Buenos Aires, in protest at millers who were limiting each buyer to half a

<sup>116</sup> Assorted reports, July–Aug. 1948: AGN, DGIPS, 94/2-1/131/802; AGN, DGIPS, 101/2-1/131/1012; assorted reports, 2 Sept. 1948: AGN, DGIPS, 132/2-1/303'1948'.

<sup>117</sup> Memoranda, 14 and 17 Aug. 1948: AGN, DGIPS, 111/2-1/260/82.

kilo of ground corn.<sup>118</sup> Casas Alemán was chased from the cinema on 4 August 1948 for a sin of omission — his department's perceived failure to deal with the Mexico City floods — and driven out of a football game later the same week for a sin of commission — the ostentatious self-enrichment that led a crowd of 60,000 fans to serenade him with chants of 'bandit, bandit'.<sup>119</sup> There were, however, at least two (very) general common outlines to popular protest in the 1940s: a strong continuity of forms of protest from the past and from the countryside, and a pragmatic political and economic reformism that gave those forms explosive content among the jostling crowds of the fast-growing towns and cities.

Many protests drew on the language and rituals of Carnival: a time-honoured and near-universal site (as Emmanuel LeRoy Ladurie and others have argued) for class struggle.<sup>120</sup> The nationalist equivalents of Carnival, the *fiestas patrias* of September, were saturated with dramas of hierarchy and subversion in Mexico's towns and villages. In Ixcateopan, Guerrero, for example, the *fiestas patrias* saw the poor dress up as shopkeepers, freely lampoon local power brokers and eventually defend *la América* from the attacks of the village wealthy, themselves dressed as thieves.<sup>121</sup> In Ometepec, Guerrero, a rancher elite racially divided from an indigenous and Afromestizo peasantry saw itself mocked by a dance, *Gachupines* (a pejorative term for the Spanish); a song, 'Zanate no eres de acá' (whose unambiguous lyrics ran 'Crow, you're not from here / Crow you're a stranger / Crow take your grain of maize / And go back to your manger'); and a village jester, Juan Balderas.<sup>122</sup> In Huajuapam, Oaxaca, indigenous ranchers celebrated the *fiestas patrias* by smashing the windows of the

<sup>118</sup> In European terms, rioters were 'setting the price' in the first case, imposing 'popular taxation' in the second: Taracena, *La vida en México bajo Avila Camacho*, I, 13–16, 42–3, 155–6, 431; E. Plasencia de la Parra, 'Commemoración de la hazaña épica de los niños héroes: su origen, desarrollo y simbolismos', *Historia mexicana*, xlv (1995), 265.

<sup>119</sup> Memoranda, 9 and 14 Aug. 1948, DGIPS to Gobernación: AGN, DGIPS, 111/2-1/260/82.

<sup>120</sup> Emmanuel LeRoy Ladurie, *Carnival: A People's Uprising at Romans, 1579–1580*, trans. Mary Feeney (London, 1980), 318–22; Mark A. Burkholder and Lyman L. Johnson, *Colonial Latin America*, 5th edn (Oxford, 2004), 273.

<sup>121</sup> Author's interview, Román Parra Terán, Chilpancingo, 25 Nov. 2002.

<sup>122</sup> 'Crow' is a fairly free translation of 'zanate', *quisqualus mexicanus*, a crow-like scavenger. Author's interview, Vicente Ramírez Sandoval, Ometepec, 9 Apr. 2002; Francisco Vázquez Añorve, *El ayer de mi costa* (Puebla, 1974), 417.

town's wealthy shopkeepers.<sup>123</sup> Such rituals, and their 'prime satirical instrument . . . the Carnival dummy or effigy made up to look like the enemy of the day', translated smoothly to the cities: thus when Judge Luis Corona declared a series of strikes illegal, a union-marshalled crowd produced 'a large doll, covered with explosive bombs, a sort of Judas from the *Sábados de Gloria*, who represented Judge Corona, and who was made to blow up with more than fifteen explosions halfway through the meeting'.<sup>124</sup> In the city of Oaxaca protestors against new water charges in 1944 burned a 'Judas-Octopus', complete with its own papier mâché water meter.<sup>125</sup> This symbolic violence was nothing new; in 1853 the authorities in Mexico City got ready for Easter Week by decreeing that 'the dolls vulgarly known as Judases shall be neither burned nor sold, should they have either clothes or symbols mocking a particular class or individual of society'.<sup>126</sup> Judas burning, as Bill Beezley observes, was 'a kind of theatre of civil rights and social equality'.<sup>127</sup> It remained in the mid twentieth century a staple of protest, taken up by Diego Rivera as one of his revolutionary archetypes; the painter collected Judases from across Mexico and worked them into several of his murals.<sup>128</sup>

The Judas was just one of the more visible and iconic manifestations of rich traditions of popular protest. A common ideological substratum underlay many, if not all, of such popular protests: a reformist critique which was based on: (a) a clear moral economy, outraged by the coincidence of widespread hardship with increasingly evident elite corruption and price-gouging; and (b) a hunger for competitive politics, channelled into widespread resistance to electoral fraud.<sup>129</sup>

<sup>123</sup> Benjamin T. Smith, 'Anticlericalism and Resistance: The Diocese of Huajuapam de León, 1930–1940', *Jl Latin Amer. Studies*, xxxvii (2005), 482–3.

<sup>124</sup> LeRoy Ladurie, *Carnival*, 322; report, Feb. 1948: AGN, DGIPS, 23.

<sup>125</sup> Smith, *Pistoleros and Popular Movements*, ch. 7.

<sup>126</sup> José de J. Núñez y Domínguez, 'Los Judas en México', repr. in *La cultura popular vista por las élites: antología de artículos publicados entre 1920 y 1952*, ed. Irene Vázquez Valle (Mexico City, 1989), 449.

<sup>127</sup> Beezley, *Judas at the Jockey Club*, 124.

<sup>128</sup> Not that Rivera was the first artist to pick up on the folk tradition of blowing up Judas, illustrations of which crop up 'innumerable times, from the popular engravings of Posada to the children's drawings of the open-air schools': Laurence E. Schmeckebier, *Modern Mexican Art* (Westport, 1939), 123–4.

<sup>129</sup> By moral economy I mean 'a consistent traditional view of social norms and obligations [and] of the proper economic functions of several parties within the community': E. P. Thompson, 'The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century', *Past and Present*, no. 50 (Feb. 1971), 79.

The exact calculations of real wage decline across the 1940s have been debated; but the minimum real wage in Mexico City fell by roughly two-thirds across the 1940s, and food shortages occurred in 1942 and 1943.<sup>130</sup> Under such conditions, relative deprivation does not need invoking to explain protest; material deprivation for much of the population — both urban and rural — was absolute.<sup>131</sup> At the same time, the corruption of national elites was a byword from diplomatic drawing rooms to the street. The greatest source of political instability during the devaluation crisis of 1948, predicted the US embassy, would be ‘the undoubted exasperation of the Mexican middle and lower classes over the steadily increasing cost of living and the evidence at every hand of the almost fantastic wealth in the possession of the ostentatious few’.<sup>132</sup> Egregious members of what the British embassy deemed a ‘corrupt ruling clique’ included Ramón Beteta, who came poor to public office and rapidly built himself extravagant mansions in Polanco and Acapulco; Antonio Ruiz Galindo, who as Secretary of the National Economy awarded himself lucrative mining concessions; Fernando Casas Alemán, governor of Mexico City, whose mansion’s fence alone was believed to have cost a quarter of a million pesos; and Maximino himself, who is alleged to have transferred the island of Caleta in Acapulco Bay from national to his own, private title.<sup>133</sup> The president was systematically excluded from press but not popular criticism; Gobernación reports recount frequent attacks on presidential abuses of power and corruption in jokes, gossip and popular ballads.<sup>134</sup> Crowd mobilizations including the Mexico City food riots of the early 1940s, the El Toreo riot and the union and market demonstrations of 1948 all stemmed from this provocative combination: an unambiguously venal administration over-seeing falling living standards.

<sup>130</sup> Jeffrey Bortz and Marcos Aguila, ‘Earning a Living: A History of Real Wage Studies in Twentieth-Century Mexico’, *Latin Amer. Research Rev.*, xli (2006), 123–7.

<sup>131</sup> Ted Gurr with Charles Ruttenberg, *The Conditions of Civil Violence: First Tests of a Causal Model* (Princeton, 1967), 3.

<sup>132</sup> Thurston to State Department, 26 July 1948: NARG, 812.00/7-2648.

<sup>133</sup> Rapp to Bevin, 12 Aug. 1948: PRO, FO 371/486/2; Bateman to FO, 29 Jan. 1947: PRO, FO 371/60940; Lázaro Cárdenas, *Obras: I. Apuntes 1913–1970*, ii, 1941–1956 (Mexico City, 1973), 294; Inspector 8 to Gobernación, 18 July 1948: AGN, DGIPS, 111/2-1/260/82; Niblo, *Mexico in the 1940s*, 275.

<sup>134</sup> See, among other items, the ballads collected in AGN, DGIPS, 111/2-1/260/82.

A second type of mobilizations centred on election rigging and developed, in particular after the municipal elections that mattered most to most Mexicans, into fully fledged political riots. Losing parties (or factions within the state party) would, once the result was known, arm themselves and seize the town hall to install their own 'legitimate' government. The violence could be interpreted by authorities as a form of collective bargaining by riot, and a compromise could be negotiated. In Ciudad Altamirano, Guerrero, the rigging of the 1946 elections caused

a street demonstration, made up of townsmen, shopkeepers, ejidal commissioners and the pueblo in general, carrying big placards as well as a truck with sound gear protesting against the [imposition] . . . while the new municipal authorities were meeting . . . the people, enraged by the mockery that was being made of them, invaded the town hall and obliged Señor Jaimés to resign . . . the next day . . . the people took to the streets once more to back the authorities they had freely chosen.<sup>135</sup>

In this case the governor nullified the elections, promising new contests within three months, and the demonstrators formed their own party ('the Free Municipio') to keep him to his word.<sup>136</sup> Such crowd protests were particularly common amid the uncertainty and democratic rhetoric of the mid 1940s. Very occasionally they led directly to an opposition victory. More frequently, crowds who complained with noise, numbers and (sometimes) violence won a more subtle, negotiated triumph: the blocking of a particularly disliked 'official' candidate's claim to office.<sup>137</sup> This could happen, it seems, anywhere in Mexico: even the tightly controlled voters of Santos's San Luis Potosí were capable, on occasion, of upsetting the electoral apple cart.<sup>138</sup> In such situations outraged marchers became — regularly albeit ephemerally — those whom George Tsebelis has labelled 'veto players', people 'whose agreement (by majority rule for collective actors) is required for a change of the status quo'.<sup>139</sup>

<sup>135</sup> *Excelsior*, 5 Jan. 1947.

<sup>136</sup> 'Acta de formación', 18 Feb. 1947: AGN, Dirección General de Gobierno, 2.311M(9)/4B/40.

<sup>137</sup> Quite often with the promise of more consideration in the distribution of political posts in the future: Gillingham, 'Force and Consent in Mexican Provincial Politics', ch. 5.

<sup>138</sup> PS-31 to Gobernación, 6 Jan. 1944: AGN, DGIPS, 94/2-1/131/802; Fagoaga to Gobernación, 6 May 1948: AGN, DGIPS, 797/2-1/48/392.

<sup>139</sup> Tsebelis's term originally describes institutional actors. Given its power to sum up a central aspect of the early PRIista state (and to stress once more the overlooked inputs of everyday Mexicans to that state's creation), I have slightly distorted the concept, stretching its ambit to include non-institutional, woollier collectivities such



It is difficult to piece together links between popular protest and the fates of individual politicians. It requires, moreover, a readiness to bridge high and low politics that is uncommon. It is clear, however, that protests could directly affect government personnel at most levels, from village councillors to the mayor of Mexico City. Thus President Alemán had favoured Casas Alemán as a malleable, Veracruzano successor, but the 1948 crowd protests turned Cárdenas against his candidacy, the ex-president telling a close friend that 'Casas Alemán must go at once. When thousands of people get up at a football game and roar in unison, "Rob-ber, rob-ber" with each step the Governor of the Federal District makes, he must go'.<sup>140</sup> It does not seem overly fanciful, given Cárdenas's enduring backstage veto power, to see this as the end of Casas Alemán's presidential hopes.<sup>141</sup> General Bonifacio Salinas Leal, an enduring military strongman, was likewise ruled out as suitable for the presidency due to public disgust at his role in the massacre at León, Guanajuato.<sup>142</sup> Such stories were more commonplace (and may be easier unearthed) at the lower levels of politics, where veto power was exercised through protests and was registered by the party's *auscultación* procedures.

*Auscultación* — literally, listening to the vital organs — was the revealing medical term used by PRIístas to describe investigations into the acceptability or otherwise of candidates whose elections would then be either rigged or discouraged. This was increasingly formalized during the 1940s, as the expanding intelligence service was used to provide biographical sketches of party candidates. Agents went to electoral districts to interview both would-be candidates and their constituents — 'I spoke', one inspector reported, 'to many, very many people from the various social strata [about] . . . the upcoming elections' — in what became a fixed (if not wholly reliable) transmission belt of

(n. 139 cont.)

as 'the crowd'. George Tsebelis, 'Decision Making in Political Systems: Veto Players in Presidentialism, Parliamentarism, Multicameralism and Mutipartyism', *Brit. Jl Polit. Science*, xxv (1995), 289.

<sup>140</sup> Monthly political report, 25 Oct. 1951: PRO, FO 371/90820; Thurston to State Department, 12 Aug. 1948: NARG, 812.00/8-2148.

<sup>141</sup> This was Brandenburg's interpretation: Brandenburg, *Making of Modern Mexico*, 106–7.

<sup>142</sup> *La Prensa*, 7 Oct. 1948.

power from Mexicans to their leaders.<sup>143</sup> Gobernación left their agents in no doubt as to just how much information was required: thus in 1948 the Subsecretario ordered a thoroughgoing investigation of the gubernatorial candidates in San Luis Potosí, piecing together their biographies, their reputations and their support by dint of visiting every district in the state. (While they were at it, he added, they should investigate 'What public works the Governor of the State has carried out; what reputation the Governor enjoys amid public opinion, that is, whether he is seen as a law-abiding man or as an individual capable of ordering crimes to enforce his authority'.)<sup>144</sup> In the ensuing reports, popular candidates were clearly flagged in a few key phrases: 'known in the region and with certain roots in the worker and peasant sectors'; 'has sympathies and roots among the peasantry'; 'even though lives in Mexico City, is not disconnected from his home'; 'greatly esteemed for having introduced drinking water'. Unpopular candidates were marked out by different qualities: 'known as a professional politician . . . with few roots in the organized sectors'; 'with no track record in political or social struggles'; 'not well-loved'; 'lacks political weight'; 'claims to be a personal friend of the president . . . but lacks political appeal'; 'a washed-up politician'; 'only known to the taxpayers who go to his office to pay their contributions'; 'enjoys little popularity . . . is rumoured to have deliberately caused a car crash that killed his wife . . . amassed great wealth as Director General of Agriculture'.<sup>145</sup> More research is needed on how often such indicators were followed and how they shaped careers; it is clear, however, that they were ignored at the party's peril.

Protests could, finally, drive policy. When the bitter jokes and corrosive gossip of 'weapons of the weak' style resisters were reinforced by militant crowds, Mexican governments sometimes listened. The most far-reaching example of consequent policy change was in the field of religion, where continual popular pressure pushed the PRIístas back from the jacobin anticlericalism of

<sup>143</sup> 'Report on the People Discussed as Potential Candidates to Federal Deputies in the State of Guerrero, 4 January 1949': AGN, DGIPS, 103/EAC.

<sup>144</sup> Orders, 18 June 1948: AGN, DGIPS, 797/2-1/48/392.

<sup>145</sup> 'Report on the Personality of the Candidates to Federal Deputies in the Various Districts of the State of Veracruz, 11 February 1940': AGN, DGIPS, 78/5; 'Report on the People Discussed as Potential Candidates to Federal Deputies in the State of Guerrero, 4 January 1949': AGN, DGIPS, 103/EAC; Juan Caccia Bernal to Gobernación, 2 Feb. 1949: AGN, DGIPS, 800/2-1/49/444.

the revolutionary period into a renewed Porfirian policy of 'live and let live'. Some of that pressure was exerted by the paramilitary activists of the Unión Nacional Sinarquista, successors to the Catholic rebels of the 1920s and 1930s, who periodically organized symbolic takeovers of provincial towns.<sup>146</sup> Much of it, however, appeared more spontaneous and politically moderate. The state of Veracruz, for example, had been in the 1920s and 1930s a centre of top-down anticlerical campaigns; by the 1940s, however, it was the scene of frequent demonstrations of popular piety and enduring religious power. When priests met in Orizaba in January 1944 the city's textile workers 'induced [them] through sheer persistence' to ignore the law and to march at the head of 2,500 people to a factory sports ground, where they celebrated an open-air service. After the mass, the return to Orizaba was an impressively staged display of grass-roots Catholic power. Factory workers, Knights of Columbus, boy scouts, bikers, a hundred nuns and five hundred children dressed in white paraded under Mexican flags (bearing images of saints instead of eagles and cacti) and the banners of fifty different confraternities. Shouts of 'Viva Cristo Rey' mingled with fireworks and cannon-fire; a truckload of priests, escorted by traffic police, waved to onlookers; at the church, where the march ended, a huge banner read 'We honour Christ the King'.<sup>147</sup> This was no isolated incident; a similar Eucharistic congress in the port of Veracruz three months earlier had followed a similar pattern, with thousands attending mass in the Parque España and joining a march under 'Catholicized' national flags, chorusing '3 times 7 is 21 / The Church the Church is Number One'.<sup>148</sup> In 1950 the body of the hardline Bishop Rafael Guizar y Valencia was exhumed, found incorrupt, and sent to lie in state in Veracruz cathedral, where it drew thousands of the devout.<sup>149</sup> Such mobilization (in the wake of two Catholic rebellions) clearly influenced PRIísta policy makers, who purged the Education Ministry of anticlericals, changed textbooks, and in 1945 removed the mandate for 'scientific and socialist' education from the constitution.<sup>150</sup>

<sup>146</sup> See, for example, Cerdán to Alemán, 16 Apr. 1943: AGN, DGIPS, 773/1.

<sup>147</sup> Isaac Forzán to Gobernación, 20 and 26 Jan. 1944: AGN, DGIPS, 98/6.

<sup>148</sup> I-62 to Gobernación, 20 Oct. 1943: AGN, DGIPS, 776/1.

<sup>149</sup> *Diario de Xalapa*, 15 June 1950.

<sup>150</sup> Victoria Lerner, 'Historia de la Reforma Educativa, 1933-1945', *Historia mexicana*, xxix (1979), 122-3.

By the early 1950s party elites were labouring to show off a new-found tolerance for Catholicism: during a 1951 tour of the south-east the secretary-general, Rodolfo Sánchez Taboada, stage-managed several church visits and told the press that the PRI was 'profoundly respectful of the religious beliefs of the pueblo'. That respect, he added, was 'a conquest of the Revolution'.<sup>151</sup> The capacity to measure those beliefs was a conquest of the post-revolutionary state, whose eavesdropping resulted in similar policy changes over conscription; and in the creation of whole new policies, namely popular markets, rushed in during the 1948 devaluation crisis as *Gobernación* glimpsed revolutionary potential in the market-goers they so meticulously observed.

Mexican political life after the revolution was marked by regular popular protests, largely written out of history as they occurred, but nonetheless influential in shaping that history, and in particular the history of the 'soft authoritarianism' of PRIísta Mexico. Popular protest was more than a simple Pavlovian reaction to declining wages and food shortages; it was more than a steam valve, periodically venting the pent-up pressures of an increasingly authoritarian, increasingly inequitable society. Protests had at least three creative, ideological functions: committed crowds exercised vetoes on government personnel choices, provided strong stimuli to policy making, and — even when they did not immediately work — served as bank deposits of resistance, reminding politicians of the high operating costs of unpopularity. Events such as the riot sparked by Maximino's bulls made elites take decisions that they might not otherwise have taken; the mere fact that a political riot exploded in the socially conservative, generally apolitical environs of the better seats at the bullfight was eloquent of the range of cross-class protest at this time.<sup>152</sup> Mexico's regime during the transition from revolutionary to post-revolutionary state was nothing like the highly autonomous (and somewhat implausible) monolith that

<sup>151</sup> *Excélsior*, 19 June 1951.

<sup>152</sup> Though sports arenas have historically been places where political protests can be launched from relative safety in the anonymity and numbers of a contained crowd. In the 1840s, for example, Mexico City crowds used to applaud when the dictator Santa Anna's fighting cocks lost. Alan Knight, 'The Several Legs of Santa Anna' (paper presented at 'Relics and Remains: A Past and Present Conference', Univ. of Exeter, Sept. 2008).

corporatist scholars described in the later 1960s and 1970s, an entity characterized by 'heavy-handed authoritarianism' and 'autocratic control and rigidity'.<sup>153</sup> The party was closer to Eric Wolf's model, 'a political holding company representing different group interests' whose main function was 'to establish channels of communication and mobility from the local community to the central power group at the helm of government'.<sup>154</sup> A significant faction of the PRI was, of course, trying to engineer a political transition — not towards democracy, as they sedulously advertised, but rather towards authoritarianism. That faction captured the presidency with Miguel Alemán in the second half of the 1940s. But they found themselves caught between the Scylla of conservative generals and the Charbydis of popular mobilization. Angry crowds combined with influential, consensus-seeking party fixers such as ex-presidents Lázaro Cárdenas and Manuel Ávila Camacho to thwart some of the more banana-republican dreams of early PRIistas. The resulting dialectic between rulers and ruled did not undermine the emerging system, but rather shaped it and reinforced it.

*University of North Carolina Wilmington*

*Paul Gillingham*

<sup>153</sup> Weinert, 'Introduction', in Reyna and Weinert (eds.), *Authoritarianism in Mexico*, p. ix.

<sup>154</sup> Eric R. Wolf, 'Aspects of Group Relations in a Complex Society: Mexico', in his *Pathways of Power: Building an Anthropology of the Modern World* (Berkeley, 2001), 133.