

British Liberalism and the French Invasion of Mexico

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Abstract Napoleon III's 1860s intervention in Mexico mystified some British observers. For many others, however, it raised urgent questions about the duties of European civilization and the future of global order. This article argues that the affair forced attitudes toward other European countries' overseas imperial projects into sharp political focus, and that in doing so it revealed incipient shifts in the center of gravity of Victorian liberalism. France's Second Mexican Empire split opinion in the Liberal Party and press, throwing light on wider disputes about the parameters of legitimate imperial intervention, the reach of the principles of nationality and self-determination, the political needs of disordered multiracial polities in less-developed parts of the world, and Europe's proper relations with Spanish America. But most Liberals who engaged with the enterprise condemned it, a fact that lays bare a changing balance of power between what historians have called "liberal imperial" and noninterventionist arguments in the 1860s. The failure of the intervention, moreover, did much to affirm powerful partisan narratives about French politics, which helped to buttress the electoral ascendancy of the Liberal Party.

William Ewart Gladstone, looking back on Napoleon III's Mexican intervention during his first term as prime minister, described it as "a compound mass of blunders, like a huge agglomerated iceberg rising high to heaven and sinking far into the deep."¹ In 1873, the leading London weekly the *Saturday Review* called it "perhaps the maddest scheme which in modern times ever tried to cloak itself under the guise of practical statesmanship."² As another periodical put it, more succinctly, "Great men make great mistakes."³ With the benefit of hindsight, after the expedition had run its course between 1862 and 1867, most British observers came to see the project as quixotic. The plan of erecting an imperial throne in Spanish America, filling it with an underemployed Austrian archduke, and maintaining order with French bayonets, could be dismissed as doomed and fevered.⁴ This retrospective disdain does much to explain why the intervention has remained

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¹ [W. E. Gladstone], "Germany, France, and England," *Edinburgh Review* 132, no. 270 (1870): 554–93, at 575. Gladstone also observed to Disraeli that the expedition was "one of the greatest political blunders ever perpetrated." Richard Shannon, *Gladstone: Peel's Inheritor, 1809–1865* (London, 1982), 496.

² "Nero and Napoleon III," *Saturday Review* (London), 12 July 1873, 46–47, at 47.

³ "The Mexican Difficulty," *London Reader* 7, no. 180 (1866): 665–66, at 665.

⁴ Historians long shared the same view: see Nancy N. Barker, "Monarchy in Mexico: Harebrained Scheme or Well-Considered Prospect?," *Journal of Modern History* 48, no. 1 (1976): 51–68.

almost entirely obscure across generations of historiography on nineteenth-century British politics and ideas.⁵

It was not obscure at the time, and nor was it obviously hopeless. Despite the presence of a large British commercial and banking community in Mexico, writers in Britain did not debate the invasion of the country with the same intensity as did the political classes in France, the United States, and Latin America, whose national interests were more immediately involved.⁶ But while the outcome of the great political experiment that was the Second Mexican Empire remained uncertain, the British treated it as a problem of obvious importance, and one with potentially vast ramifications for the future of global politics. For some observers, the fate of half the world seemed to hang in the balance, as the forces of Napoleon III's revived French Imperialism squared off against the partisans of republican institutions and constitutional self-government. For others, the summoning of a Habsburg prince from the fastness of an Adriatic castle to assume the dormant throne of the Aztecs transformed the affair into a great political romance. As James E. Sanders has argued, the eventual execution of Emperor Maximilian by a Mexican firing squad became "a world-historical event that ignited a firestorm of debate."⁷ There was, in other words, more to British thinking on the Mexican affair than amused complacency.

What follows is an examination of British public attitudes toward Napoleon III's intervention in Mexico, and an attempt to connect them with broader patterns in Victorian politics and thought. I explore, in particular, what the episode can tell us about the relations between British liberalism and imperial expansion. This is a

⁵ An exception is the recent incidental treatment in Richard Huzzey, "Manifest Dominion: The British Empire and the Crises of the Americas in the 1860s," in *American Civil Wars: the United States, Latin America, Europe, and the Crises of the 1860s*, ed. Don H. Doyle (Chapel Hill, 2017), 82–106. The fullest study of British diplomacy relative to the intervention remains Daniel Dawson, *The Mexican Adventure* (London, 1935).

⁶ The literature on French and US views of Mexico is vast. More recent work on France includes the following: Guy-Alain Dugast, *La Tentation Mexicaine en France au XIXe siècle: L'image du Mexique et L'intervention Française (1821–1862)* (Paris, 2008); Maïke Thier, "The View from Paris: 'Latinity,' 'Anglo-Saxonism,' and the Americas, as Discussed in the *Revue des Races Latines*, 1857–64," *International History Review* 33, no. 4 (2011): 627–44; Christina Carroll, "Imperial Ideologies in the Second Empire: The Mexican Expedition and the *Royaume Arabe*," *French Historical Studies* 42, no. 1 (2019): 67–100; Jerome Greenfield, "The Mexican Expedition of 1862–1867 and the End of the French Second Empire," *Historical Journal* 63, no. 3 (2020): 660–85. Recent work on US views includes Don H. Doyle, *The Cause of All Nations: An International History of the American Civil War* (New York, 2015); Theresa von Hoy, "Mexican Exiles and the Monroe Doctrine: New York and the Borderlands, 1865," *Camino Real* 7, no. 10 (2015): 39–60; Andre M. Fleche, "Race and Revolution: The Confederacy, Mexico, and the Problem of Southern Nationalism," in *The Transnational Significance of the American Civil War*, ed. Jörg Nagler, Don H. Doyle, and Marcus Gräser (Basingstoke, 2016), 189–203. For other international perspectives, see Jean Meyer, ed., *Memorias del Simposio Internacional 5 de Mayo* (Puebla, 2013); for that of Karl Marx, see Gareth Stedman Jones, "Radicalism and the Extra-European World: The Case of Karl Marx," in *Victorian Visions of Global Order: Empire and International Relations in Nineteenth-Century Political Thought*, ed. Duncan Bell (Cambridge, 2007), 186–214, at 205.

⁷ James E. Sanders, *The Vanguard of the Atlantic World: Creating Modernity, Nation, and Democracy in Nineteenth-Century Latin America* (Durham, 2014), 2. See, for instance, the *Examiner* (London) newspaper in 1869: "[T]here cannot be a doubt that few enterprises in modern history have stimulated so much of popular interest, or stirred such emotions of sympathy and sorrow in the hearts of the people of every nation." *Examiner*, 16 January 1869, 37.

well-worked subject, especially in the history of political thought.⁸ Intellectual historians have looked in detail at what they have called the “liberal imperial” arguments made by nineteenth-century scholars, theorists, and political philosophers, which premised claims for the legitimacy of European imperial rule on its capacity to improve, reform, and civilize.⁹ Some historians have argued that the spirit of imperialism was inseparable from the basic assumptions behind nineteenth-century liberalism, while others point out that not all self-defined liberal intellectuals thought the same way about empire.¹⁰ All this work sits, quite consciously, at some remove from the activities and opinions of the Victorian Liberal Party and its journalistic outriders. Party Liberalism unambiguously embraced conflicting views on imperial expansion and rule.¹¹ This was in part because of the breadth of the Liberal coalition, in part because of the fast-changing and sometimes contradictory imperatives of partisan politics, and not least because Liberal spokesmen, when in power, were often left to rationalize doubtful actions taken by men on the spot. What follows concentrates on this arena of mainstream political debate, and in particular on press and periodical commentary.¹² This focus is in large part a matter of necessity, since the invasion of Mexico did not seize the attention of Britain’s most celebrated political theorists. Instead, therefore, I attempt to distill wider public visions of politics, and to chart their relations with more rarefied schemes of political thought.

In particular, I argue that examining attitudes toward the French invasion of Mexico helps us see how far the writ of “liberal imperial” arguments ran in 1860s Britain, and how those arguments intersected with other ideological imperatives more securely attached to party Liberalism. The case is especially significant for these purposes because it raised problems about empire and imperial expansion distinct from those prioritized in the existing literature. It involved developed (and partisan) commentary on another European state’s imperial projects, a theme about which historians still know strikingly little.¹³ It demanded close consideration of the relations between domestic imperialism in Second Empire France and

⁸ Andrew Sartori, “The British Empire and Its Liberal Mission,” *Journal of Modern History* 78, no. 3 (2006): 623–42; Jennifer Pitts, “Political Theory of Empire and Imperialism,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 13, no. 2 (2010): 211–35.

⁹ Thomas Metcalf, *Ideologies of the Raj* (Cambridge, 1995); Jennifer Pitts, *A Turn to Empire: The Rise of Imperial Liberalism in Britain and France* (Princeton, 2005); Karuna Mantena, *Alibis of Empire: Henry Maine and the Ends of Liberal Imperialism* (Princeton, 2010). For contemporary critiques of empire, see Sankar Muthu, *Enlightenment against Empire* (Princeton, 2003); Gregory Claeys, *Imperial Sceptics: British Critics of Empire, 1850–1920* (Cambridge, 2010). See also Sankar Muthu, ed., *Empire and Modern Political Thought* (Cambridge, 2012).

¹⁰ Compare Uday Singh Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire: A Study in Nineteenth-Century British Liberal Thought* (Chicago, 1999), and Duncan Bell, *Reordering the World: Essays on Liberalism and Empire* (Princeton, 2016).

¹¹ John Vincent, *The Formation of the Liberal Party, 1857–68* (London, 1966); H. C. G. Matthew, *The Liberal Imperialists: The Ideas and Politics of a Post-Gladstonian Élite* (Oxford, 1973); Jonathan Parry, *The Politics of Patriotism: English Liberalism, National Identity, and Europe, 1830–1886* (Cambridge, 2006); Eugenio F. Biagini, *British Democracy and Irish Nationalism, 1876–1906* (Cambridge, 2007).

¹² Attributions of articles are from Walter E. Houghton, ed., *The Wellesley Index to Victorian Periodicals, 1824–1900* (Toronto, 1966–89); for periodicals’ political allegiances, see Alver Ellegård, “The Readership of the Periodical Press in Mid-Victorian Britain: II, Directory,” *Victorian Periodicals Newsletter* 4, no. 3 (1971): 3–22.

¹³ See Alex Middleton, “European Colonial Empires and Victorian Imperial Exceptionalism,” in *The Force of Comparison: A New Perspective on Modern European History and the Contemporary World*, ed.

expansionist imperialism overseas, an issue that historians have touched on only lightly. And it raised complex questions, on which the historiography is all but silent, about the political condition of the Spanish American republics and about the desirability of reimposing European tutelage upon that region of the globe.¹⁴ A defining complexity of the case lay in the ambiguous status of Mexico as a possible target for imperial intervention. The country's politics were universally represented as dangerously disordered, in ways that affected European interests. But it could not be denied that Mexico had stood as a self-governing republic for half a century, and the question of whether it possessed a so-called nationality was at least debatable. As a result, arguments for the imposition of disinterested, civilizing foreign rule were met with invocations of the increasingly popular doctrine of non-intervention, and of respect for national sovereignty.

Most Liberal commentators who wrote about the invasion of Mexico condemned it. That this was the case tells us something important about how the parameters of legitimate imperial intervention were negotiated in the 1860s. But the broader significance of the Second Mexican Empire in British political and intellectual history lay in its spectacular failure. The implosion of the project cut the ground from under Conservative commentators who had sympathized with the scheme, and it worked to bolster and extend narratives about the French Second Empire and Napoleon III that, as Jonathan Parry has shown, contributed importantly to the electoral ascendancy of the Liberal Party.¹⁵ France's Mexican enterprise highlighted the terminal dysfunction of a polity in which one man could pursue his own unsound policy in the teeth of massive opposition. It also underlined France's inadequacy as a governor of other peoples, and demonstrated the impracticability of exporting imperial institutions and technologies beyond France. In providing an occasion for expressions of principled hostility to Napoleon III on new terrain, and in authorizing celebration of Britain's own institutions and approach to empire, the intervention helped buttress powerful Liberal narratives. In the process, the episode also did much to confirm the perceived wisdom of Britain's less formal methods of fostering its political and trading presence in Latin America.

In what follows, I first examine British attitudes toward Mexican politics in the decades prior to the invasion, then outline some of the political and diplomatic frameworks that helped to shape British attitudes toward the intervention. Thereafter, I explain how the British, and British Liberals especially, dealt with the two major problems raised by the expedition: the legitimacy of the Second Mexican Empire, and the policy of Napoleon III and France. I close by reflecting on the intellectual consequences of the intervention's collapse.

Willibald Steinmetz (Oxford, 2019), 164–90; Martin Thomas and Richard Toye, *Arguing about Empire: Imperial Rhetoric in Britain and France, 1882–1956* (Oxford, 2017).

¹⁴ Matthew Brown similarly identifies a “Latin-America-Shaped-Hole” in the historiography of imperial Britain in his introduction to *Informal Empire in Latin America: Culture, Commerce and Capital*, ed. Matthew Brown (Oxford, 2008), 1–22, at 14–18. Mexico, however, barely features in Brown's important collection.

¹⁵ J. P. Parry, “The Impact of Napoleon III on British Politics, 1851–1880,” *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6th series, no. 11 (2001): 147–75. See also Helena Rosenblatt, *The Lost History of Liberalism: From Ancient Rome to the Twenty-First Century* (Princeton, 2018), chap. 5.

BRITAIN, SPANISH AMERICAN GOVERNMENT, AND POST-REVOLUTIONARY MEXICO

Mexico did not emerge from the ether as a subject of controversy in the 1860s. It was, in fact, already firmly established as the most egregious case of the radical failure of government and civil society which British commentators saw as afflicting nearly all of Spanish America. The reasons for Mexico's alleged political disintegration, and proposals for its reconstruction, had been canvassed in specialist writing for decades before Napoleon made the issue urgent.

These are corners of the Victorian political mind that intellectual historians know little about, and to which imperial historians and Latin Americanists have yet to be drawn.¹⁶ The large literature on nineteenth-century Britain and Latin America deals mainly with commerce, diplomacy, imaginative literature, and the practical realities of "informal empire."¹⁷ The dynamic connections between ideological and economic struggles in the Spanish republics and broader international issues and networks are becoming increasingly well understood.¹⁸ So, too, are the ways in which British officials and travelers in Latin America portrayed the region's political culture, and the purposes those representations served.¹⁹ But historians have never paid much attention to how politicians and political writers in Britain approached Spanish America, at least after the celebrity Utilitarians Jeremy Bentham and James Mill finished pronouncing on the region.²⁰ In fact, the relevance, interest, and intellectual significance of the subject stretched well beyond a handful of canonical thinkers and the excitement of the revolutionary period. Throughout the Victorian era, the Spanish

¹⁶ Andrew Thompson's suggestions about how Latin America might be incorporated into debates about imperial Britain focus on labor, emigration, and consumer consciousness; see his "Afterword: Informal Empire: Past, Present, and Future," in Brown, *Informal Empire*, 229–41, at 240–41. The contributions in Graciela Iglesias-Rogers, ed., *The Hispanic-Anglosphere from the Eighteenth to the Twentieth Century: An Introduction* (Abingdon, 2021), similarly do not deal with political argument.

¹⁷ For introductions, see Alan Knight, "Britain and Latin America," in *The Oxford History of the British Empire*, vol. 3, *The Nineteenth Century*, ed. Andrew Porter (Oxford, 1999), 122–45; Rory Miller, "Informal Empire in Latin America," in *The Oxford History of the British Empire*, vol. 5, *Historiography*, ed. Robin W. Winks (Oxford, 1999), 437–49. On culture, see Robert D. Aguirre, *Informal Empire: Mexico and Central America in Victorian Culture* (Minneapolis, 2005); Jessie Reeder, *The Forms of Informal Empire: Britain, Latin America, and Nineteenth-Century Literature* (Baltimore, 2020).

¹⁸ Jeremy Adelman, *Sovereignty and Revolution in the Iberian Atlantic* (Princeton, 2006); Nicola Miller, *Republics of Knowledge: Nations of the Future in Latin America* (Princeton, 2020); Caitlin Fitz, *Our Sister Republics: The United States in an Age of American Revolutions* (New York, 2016).

¹⁹ Desmond Gregory, *Brute New World: The Rediscovery of Latin America in the Early Nineteenth Century* (London, 1992).

²⁰ Theodora L. McKenna, "Jeremy Bentham and the Colombian Liberators," *The Americas* 34, no. 4 (1978): 460–75; Miriam Williford, *Jeremy Bentham on Spanish America: An Account of His Letters and Proposals to the New World* (Baton Rouge, 1980); Jonathan Harris, "An English Utilitarian Looks at Spanish-American Independence: Jeremy Bentham's *Rid Yourselves of Ultramarina*," *The Americas* 53, no. 2 (1996): 217–33; Mario Rodríguez, "*William Burke*" and *Francisco de Miranda: The Word and the Deed in Spanish America's Emancipation* (Lanham, 1994); James Mill is the subject of this book on "William Burke" (Mill's alleged pseudonym). See also Gregorio Alonso, "A Great People Struggling for Their Liberties: Spain and the Mediterranean in the Eyes of the Benthamites," *History of European Ideas* 41, no. 2 (2015): 194–204. On the 1820s more broadly, see the contributions in Matthew Brown and Gabriel Paquette, eds., *Connections after Colonialism: Europe and Latin America in the 1820s* (Tuscaloosa, 2013); Gabriel Paquette, "The Intellectual Context of British Diplomatic Recognition of the South American Republics, c. 1800–1830," *Journal of Transatlantic Studies* 2, no. 1 (2004): 75–95.

American republics were treated in British intellectual culture as testing grounds for political theories and as straws in the wind hinting at wider tendencies in global politics. They also raised more specific political questions—about the capabilities of what were termed the Latin races, about the relations between Roman Catholicism and republican politics, about the problems faced by postimperial successor states, and about the influences and responsibilities of the United States.

In the period between the 1820s and the 1860s, however, the central question in British writing on Spanish American government was why it was so endemically unstable. It was generally argued that most of the new republics were trapped in a state of oscillation between anarchy and despotism.²¹ They were painted as endlessly fissiparous, while the class of military *caudillo* presidents was accused of corruption, incompetence, and an inability to maintain their positions for more than a few months. Representing Spanish America in this way served both practical and ideological purposes. Not least among these, it displaced responsibility for bad investments, highlighted the dangers of manhood suffrage, and buttressed arguments about the political incapacities of nonwhite races. British explanations for the governmental sorrows of the region tracked broader shifts in nineteenth-century political thinking, with institutional arguments about the legacies of arid, corrupt, arbitrary, obscurantist, and self-interested Spanish colonial administration increasingly complemented after mid-century by claims about race and “national character.”²² Blame was also laid on the notably enervated and dissipated Spanish American branch of the Roman Catholic clergy, which was accused of helping forestall the development of habits of self-government.²³ These obstacles to stability were all presented as formidable, and British commentators argued vigorously about what institutional arrangements might best serve the needs of the multiracial polities of Spanish America. Even political Liberals like the civil servant and political economist Herman Merivale were prepared to suggest that benevolent dictators might do more good in the region than the finest constitution that Bentham could devise.²⁴ As early as the 1830s, some British political writers began to ask whether the new republics would ever summon the moral resources to stabilize and prosper without foreign intervention.

Mexico was always a leading case study within these wider debates.²⁵ This was in part because it had once been the jewel in the Spanish imperial crown, a point reinforced by recapitulations of the romantic history of Hernán Cortés and the Incan

²¹ It must be stressed that the focus here is on British *representations* of Spanish American politics, not on their objective reality. Work over the past few decades by Jeremy Adelman, Will Fowler, Nicola Miller, Eduardo Posada-Carbó, Jaime E. Rodríguez O., Hilda Sabato, James E. Sanders, and many others has shown how vibrant Latin American political life was during this period.

²² For the rise of “national character” in British political analysis, see Parry, *Politics of Patriotism*, chaps. 1–2.

²³ All these points were made very widely. See, for example, “Traits of Spanish Misrule,” *Chambers’s Edinburgh Journal*, 15 April 1837, 94–95; John MacGregor, *Sketches of the Progress of Civilisation and Public Liberty* (London, 1848), 15–23; “In Mexico,” *Bentley’s Miscellany*, no. 57 (1865): 211–20, at 211.

²⁴ [Herman Merivale], “Mexico and the Great Western Prairies,” *Edinburgh Review* 78, no. 157 (1843): 157–92, at 169–70. For Britain and Spanish American dictatorship in the 1820s and 1830s, see Alex Middleton, “Britain and the Paraguayan Dictatorship, c. 1820–1840,” *Historical Journal* 65, no. 2 (2022): 371–92.

²⁵ For an introduction, in English, to postrevolutionary Mexican politics, see Jan Bazant, “From Independence to Liberal Republic, 1821–1867,” in *Mexico since Independence*, ed. Leslie Bethell (Cambridge, 1991), 1–48; for a more recent take, Timo H. Schaefer, *Liberalism as Utopia: The Rise and Fall of Legal Rule in Post-Colonial Mexico, 1820–1900* (Cambridge, 2017); and more broadly on a large literature, Alan

Empire in W. H. Prescott's seminal *History of the Conquest of Mexico* in 1843 and in Arthur Helps's volumes of the 1850s.²⁶ It was also, in significant part, because of Britain's commercial and banking interests in the country, which were on a larger scale than those of any other European power.²⁷ After independence, a substantial community of British merchants and businessmen developed in Mexico City alongside the diplomatic establishment.²⁸ These groups funneled home more information about Mexican government and society than was available for most other Spanish American republics, some of it packaged in popular travel accounts.²⁹ The issue that served most efficiently to focus British attention on Mexico, however, was that it bordered the United States. The internal and external politics of North America was a subject of much greater sustained interest to the Victorian political classes than anything connected with Spanish America.³⁰ But arguments about the United States' territorial ambitions necessarily involved paying close attention to its policy toward its southern neighbor, especially following the separation of Texas from Mexico in the 1830s and its admission to the union in 1845. The Texas question, on which the futures of slavery and sectionalism in North America seemed for a time to pivot, was intensely debated in Britain, and prompted more focused discussion of what had happened in Mexico to make such a partition possible.³¹

The result of these connections and considerations was that early and mid-Victorian writers developed a sharper image of Mexico than of any other contemporary Spanish American republic.³² The dominant impression was that it was the most tortured of the Spanish successor states.³³ Mexico, it was argued, had experienced all the difficulties of post-revolutionary Latin America in their most acute forms. It had suffered particularly badly under the tyranny of Spain, its independence struggle had been one of the bloodiest and most drawn out, and its racial antagonisms were

Knight, "Patterns and Prescriptions in Mexican Historiography," *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 25, no. 3 (2006): 340–66.

²⁶ William H. Prescott, *History of the Conquest of Mexico*, 3 vols. (London, 1843); Arthur Helps, *The Spanish Conquest in America: And Its Relation to the History of Slavery and to the Government of Colonies*, 4 vols. (London, 1855–1861).

²⁷ Sandra Kuntz-Ficker and Antonio Tena-Junguito, "Mexico's Foreign Trade in a Turbulent Era (1821–1870): A Reconstruction," *Revista de Historia Económica: Journal of Iberian and Latin American Economic History* 36, no. 1 (2018): 149–82. This dominance started to ebb from the 1870s; see Alfred Tischendorf, *Great Britain and Mexico in the Age of Porfirio Díaz* (Durham, 1961), 128–30.

²⁸ Barbara A. Tenenbaum, "Merchants, Money, and Mischief: The British in Mexico, 1821–1862," *The Americas* 35, no. 3 (1979): 317–39.

²⁹ These include H. G. Ward, *Mexico in 1827*, 2 vols. (London, 1828); Frances Calderón de la Barca, *Life in Mexico* (London, 1843); Wm. Parish Robertson, *A Visit to Mexico, by the West India Islands, Yucutan and the United States*, 2 vols. (London, 1853), which boasted a long list of subscribers; Charles Lempiere, *Notes in Mexico in 1861 and 1862: Politically and Socially Considered* (London, 1862).

³⁰ Alex Middleton, "Victorian Politics and Politics Overseas," *Historical Journal* 64, no. 5 (2021): 1449–76.

³¹ Lelia M. Roeckell, "Bonds over Bondage: British Opposition to the Annexation of Texas," *Journal of the Early Republic* 19, no. 2 (1999): 257–78.

³² The possible exception is the Argentine Confederation (and the short-lived State of Buenos Ayres).

³³ Will Fowler, "First Impressions: Henry George Ward's *Mexico in 1827*," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 50, no. 2 (2018): 265–89, at 267–69; Will Fowler, "British Perceptions of Mid-Nineteenth Century Mexican Society: The Topos of the Bandit in Madame Calderón de la Barca's *Life in Mexico* (1843)," *Septentrión* 1, no. 1 (2007), 64–87; Hilarie J. Heath, "Mexicanos e ingleses: Xenofobia y racismo," *Secuencia*, no. 23 (1992): 77–98.

especially profound.³⁴ As a result, the country was racked with constant revolutions and civil wars.³⁵ It was hard to be precise about what counted as a revolution in such a disordered condition of society—partly because nobody understood the main political tool involved, the *pronunciamento*—but it was claimed in the 1860s that there had been more than two hundred revolutions since independence.³⁶ By one count, the country had enjoyed twenty-seven constitutions and fifty-eight presidents in the half-century after 1810.³⁷ Some commentators noted that numbers like these were almost necessarily misleading, however, since the authority of most nominal presidents barely extended beyond the capital.³⁸ Whether or not the revolving door of national leadership reflected divisions around political ideas and principles, or whether the Mexican state was simply a plaything of faction and self-interest, was a subject of considerable debate, and these disputes assumed new significance in the 1860s.³⁹ But it was clear to all that the country was in a parlous condition. As the London *Times* put it in 1860, Mexico was “altogether without example”: there was “no element of stability in the people which could enable the State to survive a casual disorder.”⁴⁰

Early and mid-nineteenth century British writers on Mexico differed about the root causes of the country’s alleged disorder. Some focused on questions of race, some on the clergy, some on the machinations of the United States. What was not in dispute, however, was that Mexico was a polity in an outstandingly grim condition. This interpretation was not seriously challenged in the debate over Louis Napoleon’s intervention. The question was what could legitimately and usefully be done about such a state of affairs, in a Spanish American context.

The rhetoric around Mexico’s political instability ratcheted up even further during the 1850s, and especially after the beginning of Mexico’s Reform War in 1857, during which there were rival claimants to the country’s presidency. Two themes become increasingly powerful in British discourse at this time. First, British bondholders and merchants began to pressure the government to intervene more directly

³⁴ For example, Robertson, *Visit to Mexico*, 2:66–76; *Mexico: The Country, History, and People* (London, 1863), 168. See also Gregory, *Brute New World*, chap. 5.

³⁵ For the historiography on Mexico as “the sick man of Spanish America” in this period, see Alan Knight, “The Peculiarities of Mexican History: Mexico Compared to Latin America, 1821–1991,” *Journal of Latin American Studies* 24, Quincentenary Supplement (1992): 99–144, at 101.

³⁶ For example, “The Mexican Empire and the Canadian Confederation,” *Dublin Review* 5, no. 9 (1865): 206–26, at 209. For the *pronunciamento*, see Will Fowler, “As Empty a Piece of Gasconading Stuff as I Ever Read”: The Pronunciamento through Foreign Eyes,” in *Celebrating Insurrection: The Commemoration and Representation of the Nineteenth-Century Mexican Pronunciamento*, ed. Will Fowler (Lincoln, 2012), 247–72.

³⁷ [F. Z. Marzials], “Mexico,” *London Quarterly Review* 21, no. 42 (1864): 387–419, at 405.

³⁸ A. H. Layard, Speech to the House of Commons, 28 July 1864, *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, 3d series (1830–91), vol. 176, col. 2160.

³⁹ For principled readings, see, for example, Lempriere, *Notes in Mexico*, 5; *Times* (London), 21 December 1860, 6. (Unless otherwise noted, all references hereafter to the *Times* and other newspapers are to London publications.) For the faction-first approach, see, for example, *Mexico: The Country, History, and People*, chap. 5.

⁴⁰ *Time*, 13 January 1860, 6. For the personalities and politics behind the *Times* articles on Mexico in this period, see Dawson, *Mexican Adventure*, chap. 18.

for the protection of their lives and property.⁴¹ This was a difficult task. As Lord John Russell, the Liberal foreign secretary, remarked in a parliamentary response in 1861, “It is frequently found in South America that a Government which commits an injury is dissolved and another in its place before redress can be obtained.”⁴² Second, an increasing number of British writers started to make the argument that Mexico’s best chance—and the best chance for British commerce—would be to have stronger government imposed from outside.⁴³ As one article put it in 1859, the country would have no future “until it falls into the hands of a higher-principled race of people.”⁴⁴ For most commentators, the clear expectation was that the United States would become master of Mexico, either directly or via some sort of protectorate or treaty arrangement.⁴⁵ Many assumed that the processes by which chunks of Mexican territory had already been detached and incorporated into the American union, as with Texas and California, were readily repeatable. These visions, of course, were riven with their own difficulties and contradictions, given the existence of sharp disagreements about the political and moral fitness of the United States to assume such a role, as a (partially) slaveholding society, a turbulent democracy, and increasingly an arena of vicious sectional conflict.⁴⁶ An extended series of debates around these issues spanned most of the nineteenth century. For present purposes, however, the important point is that the prospect of foreign rule was firmly part of British thinking about Mexico by 1861. Few imagined at this point, however, that that rule would be French.

BRITAIN AND THE INVASION OF MEXICO

The invasion of Mexico began as a strictly limited exercise in gunboat diplomacy. The project’s architects framed it as a response to repeated outrages on the property of European residents in the country and, more immediately, to the government of Mexico

⁴¹ For example, Richard Garde, *A Letter to the Right Honourable Earl Russell, on the Absolute Right of the Mexican Bondholders, Who are Subjects of Her Most Gracious Majesty* (London, 1861). For context, see Michael P. Costeloe, *Bubbles and Bonanzas: British Investors and Mexico, 1821–1860* (Lanham, 2011); Michael P. Costeloe, *Bonds and Bondholders: British Investors and Mexico’s Foreign Debt, 1824–1888* (Westport, 2003); Richard J. Salvucci, *Politics, Markets, and Mexico’s “London Debt,” 1823–1887* (New York, 2009).

⁴² Lord John Russell, Speech to the House of Commons, 15 March 1861, *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, 3d series (1830–91), vol. 161, cols. 2074–45. Though Mexico is now considered part of North or Central America, within the Victorian geographical imagination, it clearly formed part of South America.

⁴³ For example, [W. Francis Ainsworth], “State and Prospects of Mexico,” *New Monthly Magazine* 98, no. 391 (1853): 320–28, at 320; “Mexico,” *Saturday Review* 8, 24 December 1859, 766–67; *Times*, 20 May 1860, 8.

⁴⁴ “Mexico and the Mexicans,” *New Monthly Magazine* 115, no. 460 (1859): 379–97, at 397.

⁴⁵ “Mexico in Danger,” *Examiner*, 16 July 1853, 450; “Mexico,” *Fraser’s Magazine* 64, no. 384 (1861): 717–31, at 717–18; Edward B. Tylor, *Anahuac: or, Mexico and the Mexicans, Ancient and Modern* (London, 1861), 329.

⁴⁶ R. J. M. Blackett, *Divided Hearts: Britain and the American Civil War* (Baton Rouge, 2001); Duncan Andrew Campbell, *English Public Opinion and the American Civil War* (Woodbridge, 2003); Murney Gerlach, *British Liberalism and the United States: Political and Social Thought in the Late Victorian Age* (Basingstoke, 2001).

suspending payment of its debts in July 1861. Schemes of European intervention in Mexico were not new: France had blockaded a number of its ports and seized the fortress of Veracruz on a similar pretext in 1838–39. But the collapse of the United States into civil war in 1861, leaving it unable to enforce any version of its Monroe Doctrine prohibiting European incursions into the Americas, made the prospect less diplomatically awkward.⁴⁷ Following a complex series of negotiations, a joint expedition from Britain, France, and Spain was dispatched to the Mexican coast late in 1861.⁴⁸ For Lord Palmerston's Liberal administration, it was a show of force calculated to compel restitution for losses suffered by British traders and bondholders. Britain sent only a handful of ships and one detachment of marines. France's contribution to the expedition was considerably larger, and the British press soon suspected ulterior motives.

The story of the rise and fall of the Mexican Empire has been frequently told,⁴⁹ but the bare bones are these. Britain and Spain withdrew from the intervention as soon as a semi-respectable accord could be concluded guaranteeing some financial recompense, the foreign under-secretary A. H. Layard insisting that while the regeneration of Mexico was a desirable object, Britain could take no active part in bringing it about.⁵⁰ France forged ahead, sending across thousands more troops hardened in the Algerian kiln, and pressing into the interior, claiming to be acting in support of local discontent with the government of the Indian-born Liberal president Benito Juárez. Despite military reverses, notably at the gates of Puebla, the French forces ultimately succeeded in occupying large enough swathes of the country to represent it as pacified. Napoleon III offered its throne to a younger brother of the Austrian emperor Franz Josef I, Maximilian, who had served as the last viceroy of Lombardy-Venetia. After a hastily stage-managed plebiscite designed to indicate that he was the free choice of the Mexican nation, Maximilian assumed the throne of the Second Mexican Empire in 1864.⁵¹ His attempts to rule in a reforming and modernizing manner quickly alienated much of his conservative and clerical power

⁴⁷ Jay Sexton, *The Monroe Doctrine: Empire and Nation in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York, 2011). For US policy on Mexico in this era, see, among an extremely rich literature, Thomas Schoonover, *Dollars over Dominion: The Triumph of Liberalism in Mexican-United States Relations, 1861–1867* (Baton Rouge, 1978); Robert E. May, ed., *The Union, the Confederacy, and the Atlantic Rim* (West Lafayette, 1995); Dean B. Mahin, *One War at a Time: The International Dimensions of the American Civil War* (Washington, 1999).

⁴⁸ For British policy here, see Dawson, *Mexican Adventure*; Kenneth Bourne, *Britain and the Balance of Power in North America, 1815–1908* (Berkeley, 1967); E. D. Steele, *Palmerston and Liberalism, 1855–1865* (Cambridge, 1991); Silvestre Villegas Revueltas, *Deuda y diplomacia: La relación México-Gran Bretaña 1824–1884* (Mexico City, 2005); Will Fowler and Marcela Terrazas y Basante, eds., *Diplomacia, negocios y política: Ensayos sobre la relación entre México y el Reino Unido en el siglo XIX* (Mexico City, 2018). For French policy, see, among much other work, Nancy Nichols Barker, *The French Experience in Mexico, 1821–1861: A History of Constant Misunderstanding* (Durham, 1979); Michele Cunningham, *Mexico and the Foreign Policy of Napoleon III* (New York, 2001); Edward Shawcross, *France, Mexico and Informal Empire in Latin America, 1820–1867: Equilibrium in the New World* (Basingstoke, 2018); Stève Sainlaude, *France and the American Civil War: A Diplomatic History*, trans. Jessica Edwards (Durham, 2019).

⁴⁹ More recent accounts include Jasper Ridley, *Maximilian and Juárez* (London, 2001); M. M. McAllen, *Maximilian and Carlotta: Europe's Last Empire in Mexico* (San Antonio, 2015); Edward Shawcross, *The Last Emperor of Mexico* (New York, 2021).

⁵⁰ A. H. Layard, Speech to the House of Commons, 10 March 1862, *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, 3d series (1830–1891), vol. 165, col. 1277.

⁵¹ The First Mexican Empire, under Agustín de Iturbide as emperor, had lasted less than a year, from 1822 into 1823.

base, while guerrilla resistance to his regime grew rapidly in scale. The most fundamental problem, however, was the conclusion of the American Civil War in 1865. The reunited United States pressured France to withdraw its troops, which it did in 1866. With this military shield removed, the empire had lost its reason for existing. Aided by the United States, Juárez soon regained control of the country. Maximilian was arrested and sentenced to death by a court martial in 1867. News of his dignified execution reached Napoleon III as the surviving emperor welcomed visitors to Paris's Great Exhibition.

These developments challenged deeply entrenched assumptions about the proper premises of European policy toward Latin America. As far as British policy makers were concerned, the priorities asserted by George Canning in the 1820s had held ever since: Britain's main interest was in trading with the region freely and safely.⁵² Markets had to be kept open, and the assertion of undue political influence by the United States and France was (in most cases) to be resisted. Quite how these broad strokes were filled in, and were rationalized afterward, depended on a complex interplay between the impulses of the official mind and the inevitably murkier situations on the ground. In practice, Britain was prepared to intervene coercively in this period to see justice done to British subjects operating in the region: hence its participation in the initial 1861–62 expedition to Mexico. On occasion, it acted with more sustained force to secure desirable political outcomes, as in the lengthy Anglo-French incursion into the Río de la Plata in the 1840s.⁵³ British commentators tended to treat such activities as part of the necessary cost of doing business with less stable and developed parts of the world, and for the most part wrote in the same terms about France's counterpart actions.⁵⁴ But formal territorial acquisitions were never part of the formula, for Britain or for its rivals. Napoleon III's unexpected conversion of Mexico into a French garrison state was thus a radical break with established lines of policy.

The invasion did not, however, destabilize how British commentators read British interests in Spanish America. In the first place, Britain's own policy toward Mexico did not become a subject of serious controversy. There was some sharp criticism of British participation in the initial expedition, but little of its withdrawal. Almost nobody argued that Britain had missed an opportunity in not itself trying to impose order on Mexico by force. Public appetite for further territorial acquisitions in the Americas appears to have been minimal, and so criticism of the French initiative does not seem to have been driven by jealousy.⁵⁵ That Britain in due course recognized the Emperor Maximilian, in line with its conventional policy of acknowledging established governments, also attracted little dissent. Second, because Britain's interests in what form Mexico's government took were limited, few commentators feared that the country's translation into a French satellite state would have much impact on Anglo-French relations.⁵⁶ Some argued that Mexico

⁵² D. C. M. Platt, *Latin America and British Trade, 1806–1914* (London, 1972); John Gallagher and Ronald Robinson, "The Imperialism of Free Trade," *Economic History Review* 6, no. 1 (1953): 1–15.

⁵³ David McLean, *War, Diplomacy and Informal Empire: Britain and the Republics of La Plata, 1836–1853* (London, 1995).

⁵⁴ Shawcross, *France, Mexico, and Informal Empire*, chap. 2.

⁵⁵ For ostentatious magnanimity on this front, see, for example, *Times*, 15 May 1862, 10; *Times*, 27 May 1862, 10.

⁵⁶ For example, "The Letter to General Forey," *Spectator*, 24 January 1863, 1545.

was “outside the sphere of diplomacy,” meaning that assessments of Louis Napoleon’s policy were “free from the influences of national rivalry.”⁵⁷ Speculation about what the invasion meant for the future of American politics was rife—would Mexico become a Confederate slave state, would a Mexican monarchy reabsorb Texas, would Mexico become embroiled with Cuba?—but in the short term, Britain’s own position seemed secure.

British debate about the French invasion of Mexico was thus less about trying to influence British policy than it was about discerning the political meanings and implications of the episode. But it was also about curiosity and spectacle. The intervention inspired widespread bafflement, with one article in 1862 introducing it as “the oddest episode in recent history.”⁵⁸ For Disraeli, writing the next year, Napoleon III had embarked on “a Quixote adventure.”⁵⁹ These interpretations arose because the operation was obviously so difficult and seemed unlikely to result in tangible gains. The comprehensive military occupation of a country as large as Mexico was clearly a practical impossibility, especially when pursued by a foreign power whose troops had to cross the Atlantic. More than that, it was generally assumed in Britain that the enterprise must fail if the Confederacy did not succeed in establishing its independence from the United States.⁶⁰ The seemingly chimerical, unsustainable, and (from some angles) romantic character of the project, however, only served to increase interest in why it had been set in train and what it might say about modern politics. The *Spectator*’s lofty reflection in 1863 that it was “difficult to exaggerate . . . the importance of the Mexican expedition,” and that if Louis Napoleon succeeded, “he will have changed the face, perhaps the fate, of the Western world,” was widely echoed.⁶¹

Mexico accordingly attracted close attention in the British press throughout the five years of the intervention. Special correspondents and residents in the region supplied copy for periodicals including the *Saturday Review* and the *Spectator*, while newspapers eagerly consulted the Spanish American dispatches for news of the French armies and, later on, for the activities of Emperor Maximilian’s government. The *Illustrated London News* kept British readers up to date visually with engravings of important Mexican sites and individuals, and periodicals responded in detail to an unprecedented flood of new works on the history and condition of Mexico published to capitalize on the invasion, including in due course various memoirs of the intervention.⁶² Some of this coverage was scared up deliberately by Maximilian, who

⁵⁷ “France and Mexico,” *Saturday Review*, 23 August 1862, 121; [R. H. Patterson], “The Napoleonic Idea in Mexico,” *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* 96, no. 585 (1864): 74–85, at 74.

⁵⁸ “France and Mexico,” *Saturday Review*, 23 August 1862, 121.

⁵⁹ Benjamin Disraeli to Sarah Brydges Williams, 23 February 1863, *Benjamin Disraeli Letters*, vol. 3, 1860–1864, ed. M. G. Wiebe et al. (Toronto, 2009), 258.

⁶⁰ For example, Richard Cobden to Louis Mallet, 6 December 1863, in *The Letters of Richard Cobden*, vol. 4, 1860–1865, ed. Anthony Howe and Simon Morgan (Oxford, 2015), 438–39; “Mexico and the American War: The Last Napoleonic Pamphlet,” *London Reader*, 12 September 1863, 272–73.

⁶¹ “The Last Imperial Plan,” *Spectator*, 14 February 1863, 1628–29, at 1629.

⁶² For graphic *Illustrated London News* coverage, see, for example, for Maximilian, *Illustrated London News*, 23 April 1864, 384; for the commander of the French forces, Marshal Bazaine, *Illustrated London News*, 26 November 1864, 532; for the siege of Puebla, *Illustrated London News*, 13 June 1863, 657; for the castle of Miramar, Austrian residence of the archduke, *Illustrated London News*, 3 November 1866, 433. For memoirs, see Countess Paula Kollonitz, trans. J. E. Ollivant, *The Court of Mexico* (London, 1867); J. F. Elton, *With the French in Mexico* (London, 1867); Max, Baron von Alvensleben, *With Maximilian in Mexico* (London, 1867).

was determined to influence British public opinion and hence the British government in his favor. Before his accession, the emperor-to-be contracted agents and supporters to insert letters and articles into British publications, cultivate sympathetic politicians (including the Radical-turned-Conservative J. A. Roebuck), and to hold meetings urging the British to recognize his regime, but they gained little support from a skeptical business community.⁶³ It does not seem that Maximilian's efforts to cultivate public opinion managed to shift the dial, and other parties in Mexican politics do not appear to have emulated his strategy. Little was heard in Britain about the controversies in the United States over how to respond to this new imperial neighbor, but the counterpart debates in France were given wide coverage in the British press, and various landmark French speeches and pamphlets were translated into English and republished.⁶⁴ Particularly close attention was given to those produced by the French statesman and political economist Michel Chevalier, who had traveled to Mexico in the 1830s and was one of the main intellectual architects behind the concept of "Latin America."⁶⁵ Chevalier was widely assumed to be writing at Louis Napoleon's behest, and thus to offer special insight into the drivers of French policy toward the Americas.⁶⁶ In the 1860s, in short, Mexico became a subject of some importance in mainstream political debate.

BRITISH LIBERALISM, "LIBERAL IMPERIALISM," AND THE SECOND MEXICAN EMPIRE

Once it emerged that Napoleon III intended to overthrow the Mexican republic, institute an imperial monarchy, and impose his own candidate on its throne, Mexico acquired new dimensions as a problem in politics. The first set of questions the intervention raised for British observers centered on its legitimacy, and on what it signaled about the tendencies of modern politics. The invasion forced commentators to reflect from an unfamiliar angle on the fundamental dilemma of liberal imperialism: the extent to which "developed" states had the right to impose themselves on other countries for the ostensibly desirable ends of stabilizing, civilizing, and reforming them.⁶⁷ For many British contemporaries, moreover, the erection of the Second Mexican Empire came to appear a possible inflection point in the global histories of empire, republicanism, and European interference with farther-flung parts of the world.

As these interpretative priorities suggest, the British understood the intervention primarily in terms of Napoleon III deciding to impose an imperial and monarchical project on Mexico, and not—as modern historiography more often treats the episode—as a spectacular success for Mexican Conservatives in securing outside aid to further their

⁶³ Dawson, *Mexican Adventure*, chaps. 22, 24. On lobbying in France, see Erika Pani, "Dreaming of a Mexican Empire: The Political Projects of the 'Imperialistas,'" *Hispanic American Historical Review* 82, no. 1 (2002): 1–32.

⁶⁴ For example, M. Billaut, *The French in Mexico* (London, 1863).

⁶⁵ See especially M. Michel Chevalier, trans. Thomas Alpass, *Mexico Ancient and Modern*, 2 vols. (London, 1864).

⁶⁶ For example, "Mexico, Ancient and Modern," *Spectator*, 2 April 1864, 394–95.

⁶⁷ Michael Curtis, *Orientalism and Islam: European Thinkers on Oriental Despotism in the Middle East and India* (Cambridge, 2009), 215.

domestic political ends.⁶⁸ This is not to say that British writers were ignorant of the deeper causes of the invasion. That the enterprise was to some extent indebted to the Conservative party in Mexico, and especially to the machinations of Miguel Miramón and Juan Almonte, the generals who had traveled to France to lobby the emperor, was widely acknowledged.⁶⁹ There was some recognition also in the 1860s that enterprising Frenchmen had been feeling their way, practically and ideologically, toward an expansion into Mexico in previous decades.⁷⁰ But once the empire was in place, these considerations played a relatively minor role, as did the notion that Emperor Maximilian himself might have had a hand in guiding the policy of Napoleon III.

British analyses of the intervention were, nonetheless, often strikingly measured. Arguments about its advisability dwelt variously on the issues presented by the American Civil War and its conclusion, on the capacities of the races of Mexico for self-rule or at least for the reception of civilization, and on the shifting objectives of the parties in Mexican politics.⁷¹ British commentators did not draw many comparisons between the project and Britain's own imperial successes and failures, despite much reflection on the histories of Spanish and French colonial rule and on philosophical generalities about empire.⁷² In particular, it does not seem to have occurred to contemporaries that Britain had pursued a strikingly similar strategy in the First Afghan War (1839–1842), in which a more sympathetic ruler was forced on Afghanistan at the point of British bayonets, and supported by a continued British military presence before collapsing ignominiously. There was, however, substantial common ground across British writing on Mexico. The provisional character of the conquest, the fragility of the Mexican Empire, and the scale of the political challenges that faced Maximilian were obvious to all. So, too, was the fact—conceded by even the sharpest critics of the invasion—that French bayonets were sure to bring order temporarily, and that ending half a century of alleged ruinous misgovernment would be in some sense in Mexico's interests.⁷³ For conservatives, it was easy to find reasons to approve of the project.

Among liberal writers, there was far more tension. The intervention sat at an awkward intersection between strands of liberal politics. One powerful thread of liberal thinking in mid-Victorian Britain was relaxed about the deployment of European power to promote civilization, spread liberal institutions, and create safe

⁶⁸ Sanders, *Vanguard of the Atlantic World*, 1–5.

⁶⁹ For example, *Times*, 27 May 1862, 10; [Abraham Hayward], "The Plot of the Mexican Drama," *Fraser's Magazine* 76, no. 452 (1867): 250–68, at 256–67; "Mexico," *Saturday Review*, 3 August 1872, 130–1. Almonte had also been in England in 1858 lobbying for intervention.

⁷⁰ "The Mexican Empire and the Canadian Confederation," *Dublin Review* 5, no. 9 (1865): 209; "A French Idea in Mexico Ten Years Ago," *London Review*, 12 September 1863, 278–79. See Paul Edison, "Colonial Models for New World Spaces: French Reflections on Mexico, 1830s–1860s," *Journal of the Western Society for French History*, no. 43 (2015): 121–32; Shawcross, *France, Mexico, and Informal Empire*, chap. 2.

⁷¹ On the Civil War, see, for example, [Marzials], "Mexico," 419; Richard Cobden to Louis Mallet, 6 December 1863, in *Cobden Letters*, 4:439; on race, see "Chevalier's Mexico," *British Quarterly Review*, no. 80 (1864): 360–82, at 381; on parties, see "French Perplexities in Mexico," *Examiner*, 18 July 1863: 449–50, at 450.

⁷² For an attempt to understand the intervention in terms of British imperial categories, see "Hapsburg-Montezuma," *Spectator*, 15 August 1863, 2368–69.

⁷³ "The Last New Empire," *Bentley's Miscellany*, no. 55 (1864): 473–78, at 473; "The French in Mexico," *London Review*, 24 May 1862, 472; "The Latin Hobby-Horse," *London Review*, 24 January 1863: 81–83; "Chevalier's Mexico," 365–66, 379–80.

conditions for remunerative trade and investment overseas. Whether or not the conversion of Mexico from a republic to a monarchy was a constitutionally progressive move in the abstract—and opinion differed—the country’s stabilization through French influence could, in these terms, be justified as a positive move. But there was also an increasingly assertive strand of liberal political argument that was anxious about, if not actively opposed to, entanglement in foreign adventures, and predisposed to assert the principle of nonintervention as a cardinal rule in international affairs. These varieties of liberalism could coexist relatively comfortably when there was agreement on whether politically controversial parts of the world belonged properly within the arena of foreign or of colonial policy—or, in the terms that J. S. Mill had set out in grappling with these issues in 1859 in “A Few Words on Non-Intervention,” to the categories of “civilized nations” or “barbarous” societies.⁷⁴ The difficulty was when regions and states did not fit easily into those boxes.

Mid-Victorian liberals accepted that once countries had reached a certain stage of political development, the imposition of external control was out of the question. They argued increasingly, in particular, that states that possessed a developed and vigorous “nationality” lay beyond the proper bounds of foreign dominion.⁷⁵ The issue was on which side of these lines Mexico fell. The case was a trickier one than most nineteenth-century episodes of European transoceanic expansion threw up, often confined as they were to parts of the globe that were widely referred to as tribal, Asiatic, or even vacant. Mexico’s position within the hierarchy of civilization was eminently debatable. To some, it appeared almost akin to sub-Saharan Africa; to others, it looked more like southern Europe, particularly given its Roman Catholicism and recently invented “Latin” identity. In different hands, Louis Napoleon was painted as founding a new India, or as propping up an established government with bayonets as in Rome.⁷⁶ These competing representations lay at the center of British debate about the invasion. But they were not, in most cases, based on dispassionate examination of the internal workings of the Mexican polity. Clashing portrayals of Mexican society served political purposes, and reflected wider assumptions about the duties of European civilization and the future of global order. France’s intervention in Mexico, ultimately, became more rhetorically useful to liberals whose attitudes toward foreign affairs had more in common with those of Gladstone than those of Palmerston, and who could benefit from turning the Second Mexican Empire into a parable about the political costs of international knight-errantry. It was the principles of self-determination that were articulated more powerfully in liberal journalism on the intervention.

⁷⁴ John Stuart Mill, “A Few Words on Non-intervention,” *Fraser’s Magazine* 60, no. 360 (1859): 766–76, at 72.

⁷⁵ This is to simplify radically a complex set of debates. Important recent contributions to the scholarship include Georgios Varouxakis, “1848 and British Political Thought on the ‘Principle of Nationality,’” in *The 1848 Revolutions and European Political Thought*, ed. Douglas Moggach and Gareth Stedman Jones (Cambridge, 2018), 140–61, at 158; Richard Smittenaar, “‘Feelings of Alarm’: Conservative Criticism of the Principle of Nationality in Mid-Victorian Britain,” *Modern Intellectual History* 14, no. 2 (2017): 365–91. For J. S. Mill on the theme, see Georgios Varouxakis, *Mill on Nationality* (London, 2002); Georgios Varouxakis, *Liberty Abroad: J. S. Mill on International Relations* (Cambridge, 2013); Pitts, *A Turn to Empire*, chap. 5.

⁷⁶ “The Dividend on the Last Joint-Stock Invasion,” *Spectator*, 17 May 1862, 542–43.

Defending the invasion of Mexico, then, involved demonstrating that it lay outside the sphere of so-called civilized politics. Conservative commentators were impressively unified in their propagation of this analysis and in their assessment of its logical consequences. To look from Britain to republican Mexico, they insisted, was to be confronted with a “wearisome narrative of endless intrigue and treachery,” or the most “prolonged and disreputable political anarchy” in history.⁷⁷ Mexico in recent decades had been plundered rather than governed by its incapable and impermanent rulers. The country’s politics was entirely devoid of principle, resting only on faction and individual ambition, while the Mexican people were too degraded to possess any patriotic feeling or anything approaching a nationality. The country was disfigured by loose sexual morals, disregard for the sanctity of human life, and religious rituals barely distinguishable from paganism.⁷⁸ Its indigenous races, moreover, had made far less progress than those of Chile or Peru, which had relatively stable governments.⁷⁹ For the *Times*, seeking to establish the abstract legitimacy of the original intervention, Mexico had exceeded the privileges of independence, abandoned shared public conceptions of right, and offered no indication that it contained seeds of political or social self-renewal. As such, the country “called peremptorily for interference.”⁸⁰ There were even suggestions in 1861 that it ought to be handed back to a now rapidly advancing Spain.⁸¹

The Mexican Empire, in this context, represented a potential return to order from chaos. It promised to restore to the world a country that had fallen into barbarism. For the *Illustrated London News*, France had put itself forward as the “agent of European civilization for the subjugation of a semi-barbarous community and the regeneration of a beautiful country.”⁸² The conservative *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* maintained that sane men in Mexico “prayed for a strong man to rule over them” and argued that France was bestowing political order on a people who had proven unable to create it for themselves.⁸³ In other words, if foreign intervention in a disordered society was the only way to secure the blessings of security, regular taxation, and the rule of law, then it was to be welcomed. This was, in intellectual-historical terms, “liberal imperialism” at its most uninhibited.

The pursuit of such arguments was, broadly speaking, of a piece with wider later-nineteenth-century conservative assumptions about empire and international relations. But it also served more specific political purposes. Tories had argued since the earliest stages of independence struggles in Latin America that monarchy rather than republicanism would better suit the peoples of the region.⁸⁴ For decades, conservative commentators had traded on the fact that one of the few oases of stability and prosperity amid what they represented as general convulsion

⁷⁷ [Marzials], “Mexico,” 402; [J. H. Tremenheere], “The Empire of Mexico,” *Quarterly Review* 115, no. 230 (1864): 348–81, at 368.

⁷⁸ [Marzials], “Mexico,” 410–18.

⁷⁹ [Tremenheere], “Empire of Mexico,” 366; *Times*, 29 January 1867, 6.

⁸⁰ *Times*, 31 January 1862, 6.

⁸¹ “Intervention in Mexico,” *Spectator*, 14 September 1861, 998–89.

⁸² *Illustrated London News*, 24 May 1862, 519. See also [Patterson], “Napoleonic Idea,” 82.

⁸³ “Maximilian,” *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* 102, no. 622 (1867): 232–44, at 237.

⁸⁴ Y. Y. Y. [David Robinson], “South America,” *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* 15, no. 85 (1824): 135–44, at 140.

was Brazil, a constitutional empire.⁸⁵ As a slaveholding power, however, Brazil was only moderately serviceable as an institutional model. If the Mexican experiment were to succeed, however, then a great and less obviously blemished advance would be made toward the establishment of monarchical principles in the New World as well as the Old. If a European emperor could foster stability, order, and social prosperity, as republican revolutionaries continued to be dashed on the rocks around him, this would not only be a valuable symbolic victory for political Conservatives but might also help arrest the expansion of North American democracy.⁸⁶

These sorts of arguments also appealed to certain sorts of liberals. At the apex of the party, Lord Palmerston supported the establishment of the Mexican Empire for essentially pragmatic reasons, reasoning that it was in the interests of British subjects operating in Mexico to have a stable government, and that impediments to the extension of the influence of the United States were desirable.⁸⁷ Earl Russell was less enthusiastic about the French intervention, holding to the line that the Mexicans were the best judges of the form of government that suited them, though he was willing to countenance a monarchy brought about from within the country.⁸⁸ Articulate public support for the invasion, however, was mainly the province of liberals who strongly approved of Britain's own expansion and rule overseas, and especially those who aligned themselves with the rationalistic, anti-democratic strand of mid-Victorian liberalism. This would have its most celebrated outing in the debates over the Second Reform Act, which also reached their climax in the mid-1860s.⁸⁹ For those who argued that educated judgment, scientific inquiry, and elite leadership ought to retain leading roles in determining the path forward for Britain, it was not unnatural to argue that these things were even more necessary in states where there was not yet any sign of the enlightened public opinion so essential to the generation of progress within more advanced states. This standpoint was represented most forcefully, with regard to Mexico, by the prolific liberal commentator William Rathbone Greg.⁹⁰ Greg was not discriminating on these issues, arguing elsewhere that China and Japan would benefit from being brought under British tutelage. But he was satisfied that despite the defects of the French as colonizers, they were suited for the particular kind of pacification required in Mexico, and their talents were much needed. Greg's concluding line on the intervention was that "if ever there was a case in which foreign imposition was imperatively needed, was dictated by every generous as well as by every selfish motive, was certain to do much good,

⁸⁵ *Monarchy v. Republic; or, Has Not Constitutional Monarchy in Brazil, More Tended to Prosperity than Republicanism in the Other South American States?* (Bristol, 1859); [Patterson], "Napoleonic Idea," 75.

⁸⁶ [Tremenheere], "Empire of Mexico," 370, 380. Some argued also that the intervention promised to turn US attention away from Canada; see, for example, Justin Sheil, *French Thoughts on Irish Evils* (London, 1868), 9–10.

⁸⁷ Lord Palmerston, Speech to the House of Commons, 29 July 1864, *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, 3d series (1830–91), vol. 176, cols. 2202–4.

⁸⁸ Yusuf Abdulrahman Nzibo, "Relations between Great Britain and Mexico, 1820–1870" (PhD diss., University of Glasgow, 1979), chaps 10–11. Russell argued that there was nothing in Mexican character or institutions that rendered self-government impossible: Dawson, *Mexican Adventure*, 19.

⁸⁹ Robert Saunders, *Democracy and the Vote in British Politics, 1848–1867: The Making of the Second Reform Act* (Farnham, 2011).

⁹⁰ Alex Middleton, "William Rathbone Greg, Scientific Liberalism, and the Second Empire," *Modern Intellectual History* 19, no. 3 (2022): 681–707.

and could not possibly make matters worse, this was such a case.”⁹¹ Greg’s intimate friend Walter Bagehot, who often thought along similar political lines, also looked forward to “the conversion of a wretched republic into a possibly great empire.”⁹² As the *Economist* under Bagehot’s editorship summed up: “We love constitutional liberty, but we prefer organized justice to the liberty of rape, robbery, and murder.”⁹³

Liberal condemnations of the invasion, however, were more numerous, vigorous, and developed. This was as might be expected. The intervention was naturally an emotive subject for those liberals who saw it as a provocative and violent contravention of the international order, or as a new instalment of an aggressive form of empire premised on military conquest and alien rule.⁹⁴ Because the enterprise did not raise the questions about specific British duty, responsibility, and policy that shaped so much Victorian discourse on questions of empire, there was less need to protect previously invested political and intellectual capital by defending it. Critics were thus largely able to dominate the liberal press. Their central contentions were that Napoleon III had ignored general principles of international relations that mattered more than the disordered condition of Mexico, and that endeavors to civilize by the sword in circumstances such as Mexico presented were illegitimate and futile.

Attempts to rehabilitate Mexican politics were a fundamental part of making this case. If it could be demonstrated that Mexico contained the elements of a civilized political community, it would follow that it deserved to be insulated from the political whims of Louis Napoleon. This argument could only be plausibly pushed so far. Even Richard Cobden, long one of Britain’s most prominent and enthusiastic opponents of imperial adventurism, wrote that “the people of that Country are sunk in a state of degradation & demoralization which incapacitates them for self-government.”⁹⁵ Nonetheless, Mexico was widely presented as a country that had had in practice enjoyed self-government, liberty of the press, and liberty of conscience.⁹⁶ The emphasis on these more hopeful principles was accompanied by numerous attempts to redescribe Mexican party politics in terms of meaningful motivating principles: liberalism versus conservatism, federalism versus centralism, the church party versus everyone else. Liberal commentary hostile to the intervention also dilated on the sophistication of the country’s press, and tried to show that Juárez’s Liberal government had possessed redeeming features that indicated Mexican self-renewal was a possibility.⁹⁷

⁹¹ [W. R. Greg], “Foreign Policy of the English Government and the English Nation,” *National Review* 34 (1863): 465–92, at 483, 472–74, 479–83.

⁹² [Walter Bagehot], “The State of Europe,” *National Review* 18, no. 35 (1864): 293–308, at 295–96. For Greg and Bagehot, see Gregory Conti, *Parliament the Mirror of the Nation: Representation, Deliberation, and Democracy in Victorian Britain* (Cambridge, 2019), 179; for Bagehot’s sympathy toward the Second Empire, see Alexander Zevin, *Liberalism at Large: The World According to the Economist* (London, 2019), 92–95.

⁹³ “Mexico,” *Economist*, 28 June 1862, 704. See also “The New Mexican Empire,” *Economist*, 22 August 1863, 925–26, which regretted that France had not made Mexico a colony. For the *Economist*’s general approval of European imperial projects in this era, see Zevin, *Liberalism at Large*, chaps. 1–2.

⁹⁴ A. J. P. Taylor, *The Trouble Makers: Dissent over Foreign Policy, 1792–1939* (London, 1957).

⁹⁵ Richard Cobden to William Hargreaves, 18 September 1863, *Cobden Letters*, 4:415. See also “The Late Mr. Cobden on the American War and Mexico,” *Anti-slavery Reporter* 13, no. 10 (1865): 243.

⁹⁶ “Another Suffragan Monarchy,” *Examiner*, 15 August 1863, 513–14, at 513.

⁹⁷ Often drawing on Robertson, *Visit to Mexico*, esp. 2:96–106, 131–39.

The crucial rhetorical move, however, was the insistence that Mexico possessed a nationality, which Napoleon III was attempting to undermine. Against claims in the conservative press that the Mexican forces were no more than brigands and mercenaries, liberal commentators argued that the available narratives of the battles with the French—which involved Mexican troops willingly sacrificing their lives in the face of overwhelming odds—proved that they must have been fighting for the life of their country.⁹⁸ This being the case, the empire was sure to fail as a means of teaching Mexico to respect or to govern itself. As the refrain increasingly ran in more advanced liberal commentary on foreign politics across the globe, peoples could not be drilled and dragooned into a capacity for self-rule.⁹⁹ The intervention could thus be presented as an atavistic move, and one at odds with Britain’s professed public values. As the historian, travel writer, and Liberal MP Alexander Kinglake complained in Parliament in response to Britain’s promise to recognize the emperor of Mexico, he “had always thought that one of the great objects which England aimed at was the independence of nations.”¹⁰⁰ Maximilian’s fall, according to the Peelite-turned-moderate Liberal Abraham Hayward, was a powerful confirmation of the baleful consequences of “the calculated and interested suppression of independence and nationality.”¹⁰¹

From this angle, the intervention had violated international right and policy. This argument did not rest on the moral force of the Monroe Doctrine, which was widely regarded in Britain by this stage as an unenforceable piece of presumption. The case gained the purchase it did because, by the 1860s, the principle of nonintervention in the internal affairs of other so-called civilized nations had become an article of faith for many liberals.¹⁰² For some, like W. E. Forster, this had included even the initial joint expedition to Mexico of 1861.¹⁰³ But the point made most frequently in liberal commentary on the advanced stages of the Mexican intervention was that, however depraved the political condition of the country, the choice of government and rulers should still have been left with its people.¹⁰⁴ Claiming to represent the cause of good government was not an acceptable defence for occupation, in the Mexican case as

⁹⁸ “The French Conquest of Mexico,” *Westminster Review* 24, no. 2 (1863): 313–44, at 337. There were other suggestions that the Mexico might find a national spirit in uniting against France; see [Marzials], “Mexico,” 419.

⁹⁹ “French Conquest,” 342. For John Morley on this theme, see Middleton, “Britain and Paraguay,” 386–87.

¹⁰⁰ Alexander Kinglake, Speech to the House of Commons, 29 July 1864, *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, 3d series (1830–91), vol. 176, col. 2201.

¹⁰¹ [Hayward], “Mexican Drama,” 268. For Hayward’s allegiances, see Philip Harling, s.v. “Hayward, Abraham (1801–1884),” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography Online*, 2004, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/12793>. Compare the *Times*’s denial that the collapse of the project vindicated the fact of Mexico’s national independence: *Times*, 5 April 1867, 9.

¹⁰² John Stuart Mill was the great theorist of nonintervention, but it is not clear whether he considered Mexico to belong among the “barbarous” states that could benefit from interference. A reference to Mexico in an article of February 1862 suggests that he was skeptical of the initial expedition, and fearful of the Confederacy spreading slavery to the country: John Stuart Mill, “The Contest in America,” *Fraser’s Magazine* 65, no. 386 (1862): 258–68, at 267. The only reference to the Mexican enterprise in his 1860s letters, however, deals with its implications for French land taxes: J. S. Mill to John Elliott Cairnes, 9 February 1865, *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, ed. J. M. Robson, 33 vols. (Toronto, 1963–1991), 16:993–94.

¹⁰³ *Speech of Mr. W. E. Forster; M. P., on the Slaveholders’ Rebellion* (Manchester, 1863), 8–9.

¹⁰⁴ “French Perplexities in Mexico,” *Examiner*, 18 July 1863, 449–50; “Mexico,” *Spectator*, 4 January 1862, 13–14.

much as in the partition of Poland.¹⁰⁵ For the *Spectator*'s correspondent, an especially vigorous critic of the intervention, the exercise was simply "a robbery on a large scale," a "shameless farce" in which the Mexicans had been "conquered, humiliated, and manacled."¹⁰⁶ From this point of view, the principle of nonintervention was as sound in the New World as in the Old.¹⁰⁷

Liberals also expressed considerable anxiety about the wider political implications of Napoleon III's scheme. In the first place, it seemed to suggest a shift in the spirit of the age. The *Westminster Review* called the Mexican expedition "the most extraordinary event of our day" on the basis that it was "the most entirely out of keeping with the character, spirit, and circumstances of the time which produced it."¹⁰⁸ It had resurrected ideas of international aggression and conquest for the sake of conquest that had seemed long dead. Cobden commented that at a time when nonintervention had become the guiding philosophy of European relations, Louis Napoleon had returned to the policy of his uncle, Napoleon Bonaparte.¹⁰⁹ Some suggested that the emperor had reached even further back into history, to the sixteenth century or even to the expansionism of imperial Rome.¹¹⁰ In this scheme, France was engaged not in a program of civilizational uplift among a grateful people but in an unprincipled and brutal war against a country that would not submit. Rumors of atrocities against innocent villagers were raised in Parliament, while it was widely reported that coarse, brutal, ignorant French officers had engaged in acts of petty tyranny.¹¹¹

For most Liberal commentators, then, condemning the French intervention in Mexico was an exercise in reinforcing and extending a certain set of principles of international order, especially the primacy of nationality, and in distancing themselves from a militaristic, conquering form of imperialism, which (with significant presentational differences) was endorsed by most organs of domestic conservative opinion. The particular version of imperialism that British liberals were primarily concerned about, however, lay closer to home.

BRITISH LIBERALISM, IMPERIAL FRANCE, AND THE MEXICAN INTERVENTION

The second set of questions raised by Louis Napoleon's intervention in Mexico was about France and the French. For what reasons had the emperor chosen this unanticipated course, and what did it say about the condition of France's domestic politics and institutions? These issues were of far greater immediate significance, as far as British partisan politics was concerned, than were reflections on the future of

¹⁰⁵ [Hayward], "Plot of the Mexican Drama," 268.

¹⁰⁶ A Freeman, "The French in Mexico," *Spectator*, 15 August 1863, 2373. Other *Spectator* editorials, however, wanted Mexico rescued from anarchy; see "Earl Russell on Mexico," *Spectator*, 12 October 1861, 1110–11.

¹⁰⁷ "Mexico," *Fraser's Magazine*, 64, no. 384 (1861): 730.

¹⁰⁸ "French Conquest," *Westminster Review*, 24, no. 2 (1863): 313.

¹⁰⁹ Richard Cobden to William Hargreaves, 18 September 1863, *Cobden Letters*, 4:415–16. For context, see Stuart Semmel, *Napoleon and the British* (New Haven, 2004).

¹¹⁰ "French Conquest," *Westminster Review*, 24, no. 2 (1863): 314; Parry, "Napoleon III," 155–56.

¹¹¹ Alexander Kinglake, Speech to the House of Commons, 29 July 1864, *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, 3d series (1830–91), vol. 176, cols. 2201–2; *Mexico. Reprinted from the Saturday Review* (London, 1865), 16–18.

Mexico. France was easily the most significant foreign country in the Victorian political imagination. It was the main external foil for claims about British identity, and the nation with which the British forged the closest social, political, and intellectual links.¹¹² Historians have shown that arguments about politics over the Channel, and about the interfaces between the foreign policies of Britain and France, held even more political significance than usual in the era of the Second Empire.¹¹³

Even so, existing historiography does not adequately stress the sheer amount of time and energy devoted by the mid-Victorian press to divining the motivations behind Napoleon III's complex external policy, probably because most scholarship on Britain and foreign affairs during the 1850s and 1860s continues to focus on the high-political and diplomatic arena.¹¹⁴ British public discourse throughout this period was bowed down under the weight of theorizing about what the emperor of France wanted to achieve on the global stage, and about how those goals were connected with his domestic ambitions.¹¹⁵ The Mexican intervention took place far enough into his reign that it could be understood mainly in terms of extant and to some degree competing conceptions of the internal dynamics of Napoleonic Imperialism.¹¹⁶

Napoleon III's stated aims for the expedition represented the emperor as a quasi-philosophic system-monger on a grand scale. They attracted extensive discussion, and among liberals, almost equal quantities of skepticism. The emperor's proclaimed objective—to propitiate the Latin race in a putative struggle for mastery with the forces of Anglo-Saxonism—could be made to fit relatively comfortably with his wider schemes. Conservative sympathizers argued that as Europe continued to remodel itself around the principle of nationality, an intervention that might help to set France at the head of a powerful Continental “Latin” triumvirate alongside Italy and Spain was not necessarily bad policy.¹¹⁷ There were those who saw wisdom, too, in the emperor's more detailed explanation for the intervention, in which he claimed that its purposes were to stop the United States from dominating the Americas, to secure France's West Indian colonies, to establish a friendly and well-disposed influence near the center of the continent, and to promote commerce. On this analysis, the French emperor had engaged in “a bold and Utopian design” to create a balance of power in the Americas and to erect a barrier to the progress of

¹¹² Sylvie Aprile and Fabrice Bensimon, eds., *La France et L'Angleterre au XIXe siècle: Échanges, Représentations, Comparaisons* (Paris, 2006).

¹¹³ Parry, “Napoleon III”; R. Koebner and H. D. Schmidt, *Imperialism: The Story and Significance of a Political Word* (Cambridge, 1964), chap. 1; Georgios Varouxakis, *Victorian Political Thought on France and the French* (Basingstoke, 2002); Matthew Kelly, “Languages of Radicalism, Race, and Religion in Irish Nationalism: The French Affinity, 1848–1871,” *Journal of British Studies* 49, no. 4 (2010): 801–25.

¹¹⁴ For example, Steele, *Palmerston and Liberalism*; David Brown, *Palmerston and the Politics of Foreign Policy, 1846–55* (Manchester, 2006); Geoffrey Hicks, *Peace, War, and Party Politics: The Conservatives and Europe, 1846–59* (Manchester, 2007).

¹¹⁵ For Britain's obsession with Napoleon III's pronouncements, see Charles Wentworth Dilke, *Greater Britain: A Record of Travel in English-Speaking Countries during 1866 and 1867*, 2 vols. (London, 1868), 1:278.

¹¹⁶ Cobden argued that, having taken Mexico City, Napoleon III was too embarrassed to order his forces home without leaving a permanent trace of his occupancy. Richard Cobden to William Hargreaves, 18 September 1863, *Cobden Letters*, 4:415.

¹¹⁷ [Patterson], “Napoleonic Idea,” 76.

the Anglo-Saxon race.¹¹⁸ Others detected similarly grand unspoken aims in the invasion. For those who identified the Second Empire with the interests of the Roman Catholic Church, the Mexican expedition could be read as a bold stroke of piety. The emperor, it was suggested, was attempting to arrest to decline of Catholicism in America, to check the spread of (Anglo-Saxon) Protestantism, and to reflect luster on the church with which the moral greatness of France was indelibly connected.¹¹⁹

Liberals, however, largely preferred to explain the expedition in terms of longer-standing French (and Napoleonic) habits. The first, simplest, and most popular explanation offered in the liberal press for the intervention was that it was a typically French tilt for greatness and glory. The pursuit of military success overseas had long been understood by the British as a necessary part of pacifying and inspiring France, but this strategy was seen to be resorted to more readily than ever under the rule of Napoleon III. In providing an outlet for France's surplus animal energies, the intervention in Mexico was designed to reduce political restlessness at home and to produce a healthier social condition.¹²⁰ North Africa had served this purpose in the 1830s and 1840s, and French troops had been dispatched on a series of missions in Europe in the 1850s; now it was the turn of the Americas.¹²¹ Some writers saw the expedition as calculated to channel domestic pressure for another Continental war.¹²² Given everything that was known about Mexico, it was easily possible to make a case for the country as an appropriate sink for energies of this kind: it had "contributed so little to the benefit of the world that it may fitly be employed as a drain or conductor for unemployed ambition."¹²³ So Mexico had presented itself as a convenient answer to a perennial question.

Developing these arguments, liberals often saw the invasion of Mexico as following the same flawed logic as earlier French colonial projects.¹²⁴ For the soon-to-be Liberal MP Charles Dilke, who visited Mexico in the declining days of the empire, the dismal trajectory of the intervention saw French colonial history repeating

¹¹⁸ "The Emperor's Life Pill for Mexico," *London Review*, 15 August 1863, 161–62, at 162.

¹¹⁹ [Patterson], "Napoleonic Idea," 75–76.

¹²⁰ On the wider patterns of thought here, see Duncan Bell, "Republican Imperialism: J. A. Froude and the Virtue of Empire," *History of Political Thought* 30, no. 1 (2009): 166–91. Conservatives also made these points, for example, [R. H. Patterson], "The European Crisis," *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* 95, no. 579 (1864): 110–32, at 127.

¹²¹ "The French in Mexico," *London Review*, 24 May 1862, 472.

¹²² French commitments in Mexico were seen to limit France's military options in Europe; see, for example, "Poland and Mexico," *Examiner*, 10 October 1863, 643–44. It was often argued that Mexico might be used as a bargaining chip in Continental power politics, for example, as compensation for the family of Leopold of Belgium after the emperor had annexed their European kingdom (see "The Second Empire," *Saturday Review*, 10 September 1870, 316–17, at 317); or as a way of compensating Austria for the loss of Venetia (see "The French View of the Mexican Intrigue," *Spectator*, 24 May 1862, 575–76).

¹²³ "France and Mexico," *Saturday Review*, 5 July 1862, 5.

¹²⁴ For French colonial policy and imperial culture, see esp. David Todd, "A French Imperial Meridian, 1814–1870," *Past and Present*, no. 210 (2011): 155–86; David Todd, *A Velvet Empire: French Informal Imperialism in the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton, 2021); Jennifer E. Sessions, *By Sword and Plow: France and the Conquest of Algeria* (Ithaca, 2011); Jennifer E. Sessions and Naomi K. Andrews, eds., "The Politics of Empire in Post-revolutionary France," special issue, *French Culture, Politics, and Society* 33, no. 1 (2015).

itself, with matters going bad in much the same way as in Canada, India, Egypt, and New Zealand.¹²⁵ It was widely thought, mainly in the early stages of the invasion, that Louis Napoleon's plan was to turn Mexico into a "Transatlantic Algeria," funded by the extraction of its mineral wealth.¹²⁶ Given the robust critiques that had been directed at the Algerian enterprise by both British and French political commentators since the 1830s, many in Britain found it difficult to understand why this seemed an attractive prospect, or at least why the emperor thought it likely to succeed.¹²⁷ There were suggestions that the invasion represented an opportunity for the French to apply the hard lessons they had learned from their perplexities in North Africa: maybe in this case they would seek to attract the support of influential native chiefs rather than impose their procrustean bureaucracy in defiance of Indigenous traditions.¹²⁸ But these expectations were quickly disappointed, and Mexico became a link in the chain of a longer-running debate about whether France as a nation possessed the ability to colonize effectively, as distinct from being able to institute the fundamentals of political order under expensive military shields.¹²⁹

The more intriguing and disquieting prospect, however, was that Mexico represented a new phase in Napoleon III's schemes to reorder the world. France's habit of intervening in the internal affairs of foreign polities in order to direct their politics in more congenial directions, of course, began long before Louis Napoleon's coup d'état.¹³⁰ But the Second Empire had been exceptionally active in seeking to impose its will on the governments of otherwise independent states, both inside and outside of Europe. It was widely taken for granted that propagandism was inherent to the emperor's plebiscitary despotism: the historian and self-described Manchester liberal Goldwin Smith argued that imperial absolutism could not bear "the moral rebuke of neighboring freedom."¹³¹ Mexico was slotted neatly into these schemes. Some joked that the emperor could not stand the idea of a republican government in a growing country only a fortnight's sail from Paris; others suggested that the invasion was a resumption of a role that the French had recently abandoned in Syria.¹³² But for some critics of the expedition, Mexico instead looked like a field test for the imposition of imperial institutions and governing technologies—most prominently, the plebiscite—overseas. The intervention, interpreted in this way, signaled that Napoleon III had gone beyond simply looking to prop up foreign regimes sympathetic to his own to wanting to project across the globe facsimiles of the constitutional and administrative arrangements he had established in France. The experiment undertaken in Mexico was widely portrayed as a "scientific" exercise in constructing

¹²⁵ Dilke, *Greater Britain*, 1:278. For British eyewitnesses of the empire, see also W. H. Bullock, *Across Mexico in 1864–5* (London, 1866).

¹²⁶ "The French in Mexico," *Saturday Review*, 14 June 1862, 669. See also "Mexico," *Saturday Review*, 25 July 1863, 108–9; "The Last Imperial Plan," 1629.

¹²⁷ Alex Middleton, "French Algeria in British Imperial Thought, 1830–1870," *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History* 16, no. 1 (2015); also Lempriere, *Notes in Mexico*, 336.

¹²⁸ "French Perplexities in Mexico," *Examiner*, 18 July 1863, 449–50.

¹²⁹ Middleton, "French Algeria."

¹³⁰ For earlier French intervention in Greek politics, see Thomas W. Gallant, *The Edinburgh History of the Greeks, 1768–1913: The Long Nineteenth Century* (Edinburgh, 2015), chaps. 3–4.

¹³¹ Goldwin Smith, *England and America* (Manchester, 1865), 33.

¹³² "Breakdown of Imperialism in Mexico," *Examiner*, 16 September 1866, 577–78, at 577; *Illustrated London News*, 24 May 1862, 519.

a mirror of the Second Empire over the Atlantic.¹³³ The *Economist* argued that the purpose of the expedition was “to propagate and extend . . . the Imperial system of bureaucracy.”¹³⁴ As the *Examiner* described in greater detail, the Bonapartist strategy of suppressing popular government, forcing imperial institutions on an unwilling people at the point of a bayonet, and ruling by priestcraft and police was being followed to the letter.¹³⁵ It presented the early decrees issued by the provisional government of Mexico in 1863 as “literal reproductions of fundamental principles of despotism placarded on the walls of Paris” during Louis Napoleon’s coup d’état in 1851. The creation of another state based on these principles was cause for “joy in the dark places of cruelty.”¹³⁶ Liberals watched the Mexican experiment as eagerly as they did because, among all its other sources of interest, it came to be understood as a test of whether imperial institutions on the French model could take root and reproduce themselves on foreign soil.¹³⁷

The other great point of interest about France’s Mexican intervention was that it brought to the boil all the simmering tensions in French domestic political life. For all that British writers supposed the invasion to have been intended as a “safety valve” for military and national energies, they were under no illusions that the invasion was popular in France. Some commentators suggested during its early stages that Louis Napoleon might profit domestically by demonstrating the power to create and give away empires and from showing how civilization could be carried across the globe on the wings of imperial eagles.¹³⁸ But it rapidly became established, rhetorically at least, that the project was peculiarly the emperor’s own, commenced and continued in defiance of the rest of his country.¹³⁹ As early as 1863, French newspapers seemed to reveal that every major party in French politics was against the expedition and that their opposition held unmistakable electoral appeal.¹⁴⁰ Even the army was apparently discontented, while the French commercial classes predictably opposed the astronomical cost of the expedition.¹⁴¹ Reports circulated that some Parisians even wished disaster on the French forces.¹⁴² Henry Reeve, editor of the *Edinburgh Review*, confirmed that the mistaken Mexican expedition had contributed significantly to the domestic unpopularity of Napoleon III’s government.¹⁴³ As the British press represented it, then, the fallout of the Mexican enterprise in France exposed fundamental disharmonies between the emperor, his

¹³³ “Emperor’s Life Pill,” 161.

¹³⁴ “Mexico,” *Economist*, 28 June 1862, 704.

¹³⁵ “Suffragan Monarchy,” 513; “President Johnson and Napoleon III,” *Examiner*, 21 October 1865, 661–62, at 662. See also “Emperor’s Life Pill,” 161–62.

¹³⁶ “Suffragan Monarchy,” 513.

¹³⁷ For example, “Breakdown of Imperialism in Mexico,” *Examiner*, 16 September 1866, 577–78.

¹³⁸ “The Mexican Empire,” *Saturday Review*, 15 August 1863, 203–4.

¹³⁹ For example, Frederic Harrison, “England and France,” in *International Policy: Essays on the Foreign Relations of England* (London, 1866): 51–152, at 148; “Mexico,” *Saturday Review*, 11 March 1865, 269–70.

¹⁴⁰ “French Conquest,” 316; [Patterson], “Napoleonic Idea,” 75. Louis Blanc’s opposition was widely thought to be significant; see *Athenaeum*, 27 July 1867, 103–4.

¹⁴¹ “Mexican Empire and the Canadian Confederation,” *Dublin Review* 5, no. 9 (1865): 218–19.

¹⁴² “Napoleon’s Rule,” *London Reader*, 4 July 1863, 235.

¹⁴³ Henry Reeve, “Alexis de Tocqueville,” in Henry Reeve, *Royal and Republican France*, 2 vols. (London, 1872), 2:77–190, at 187; Reeve, “France in 1870,” in Reeve, *Royal and Republican France*, 2:237–309, at 306.

politicians, and the French people. In this way, Mexico underlined profound systemic failings in a French imperial regime that could persist in a despised line of policy against the (ostensible) will of the political classes and of public opinion, and helped knit together criticisms of French domestic, foreign, and imperial policy.

CONCLUSION

However the Mexican intervention might have looked to the British in hindsight, at the time it seemed much more than a moment of madness. The enterprise might have been chimerical, but its implications were serious. Louis Napoleon's incursion into Mexico invited the British to look through a new lens at major political questions that were usually treated separately: about the parameters of legitimate imperial intervention, about the reach of the principle of nationality, about the political needs of disordered multiracial polities in less-developed parts of the world, and about Europe's proper relations with Spanish America. Arguments on all these points turned to a considerable extent on competing interpretations of the state of Mexican politics. But British contentions about Mexico owed more to broadly applicable doctrines, principles, and desires than they did to forensic, dispassionate examinations of the country's history and society. Arguments were shaped by clashing opinions on the relative merits of monarchies versus republics, on the virtues of order versus liberty, on the global rights and duties of European civilization, and on the abstract justice of imperial warfare. That the intervention was taking place at arm's length, in French rather than British hands, eliminated some of the political complexities attached to arguments about Britain's own imperial efforts. But it introduced other difficulties, not least making sense of Napoleon III's objectives.

In these ways, France's invasion of Mexico encouraged the British to look from an oblique angle at some of the main ideological issues raised by Britain's own foreign and imperial policies in the 1860s—and at questions of premeditated imperial interference and conquest that would become increasingly significant during the 1870s and 1880s.¹⁴⁴ It arrested the attention, in particular, of liberals who were enthusiastic about the principle of nonintervention and the rights of nations to choose their own governments, and who disliked imperial aggression. Commentators and politicians of this stamp offered a forceful rebuttal of the Conservatives and conservative Liberals who argued that the invasion was a legitimate and promising piece of liberal imperialism, and they drowned out those within the party who, like Lord Palmerston, were prepared to tolerate the Second Mexican Empire for pragmatic reasons.¹⁴⁵ Mexico became, as such, an important tool in the rhetorical armory of the wing of the Liberal Party that was more progressive on international and imperial affairs.

From the point of view of British liberalism more broadly conceived, however, the most important thing the Second Mexican Empire did was to fail. British debate about

¹⁴⁴ See also, for British imperial attitudes in the 1860s, Richard Huzzey, "Minding Civilisation and Humanity in 1867: A Case Study in British Imperial Culture and Victorian Anti-slavery," *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 40, no. 5 (2012): 807–25.

¹⁴⁵ This Palmerstonian group was significant in size, but uninterested in moralizing about Mexico. Perhaps even more numerous were those party Liberals who thought either that the whole enterprise was doomed from the start or that it was not important to have a strong view on the conflict.

the invasion of Mexico had many moving parts, and as shown above, not all party Liberals agreed on what the enterprise meant while it remained a going concern. Analogous dissensions over the validity of other European countries' programs of imperial expansion, and over Britain's own, would continue to bubble away within the party for the rest of the nineteenth century. The ignominious end of the Second Mexican Empire, however, could be assimilated to more straightforwardly unifying arguments about the institutional and moral failings of France's Second Empire, which played a crucial role in the success of the mid-Victorian Liberal Party.

The outcome of the invasion did nothing to reconcile clashing readings of Mexican politics. Maximilian's execution was widely described as a tragedy, but it had become obvious by 1866 that his position was untenable.¹⁴⁶ The expulsion of the French from Mexico did not make it any clearer to the British whether the country was capable of rational self-government or whether its people really possessed a nationality.¹⁴⁷ Charles Dilke treated Maximilian's fate as a demonstration of the fact that white and "red" men could not inhabit the same soil.¹⁴⁸ The historian, Catholic, and political Liberal Lord Acton, by contrast, argued that the still-parlous condition of Mexico in 1868 resulted from an array of problems in its social, intellectual, and material state, but insisted that the basic issue was that an intensely aristocratic society, under the thumb of a powerful church interest, could not support a democratic polity.¹⁴⁹ The same familiar points about the incapacities of Mexico's constituent races and the depressing influence of the country's corrupt priesthood continued to be repeated in British commentary into the 1870s and beyond, until the stabilizing regime of Porfirio Díaz finally began to shift public narratives.¹⁵⁰ But there was less such writing after the death of Maximilian.¹⁵¹ As the *Times* noted in 1868, Mexico had "passed out of sight and out of mind without regret or inquiry."¹⁵² Further European invention came to seem extremely unlikely.¹⁵³ For British thinking about Spanish American politics, the intervention in Mexico was not a transformative

¹⁴⁶ "The Empire of Mexico," *Tinsley's Magazine* 1 (1867): 92–99, at 99; "Maximilian," *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* 102, no. 622 (1867): 232–44, at 232; "Napoleon III," *London Quarterly Review* 40, no. 79 (1873), 130–61, at 156–67; "The Last of the Mexican Tragedy," *London Journal*, 11 May 1872, 300–1. For prior pessimism, "Mexico," *London Review*, 22 September 1866, 311–12; "Mexico," *Saturday Review*, 29 September 1866, 383–84, at 384.

¹⁴⁷ C. B. Adderley, *Europe Incapable of American Democracy: An Outline Tracing the Irreversible Course of Constitutional History* (London, 1867): 33–34.

¹⁴⁸ The visit was part of the tour that would turn into Dilke's study *Greater Britain*, 1:129–30.

¹⁴⁹ Lord Acton, "The Rise and Fall of the Mexican Empire," in *Historical Essays and Studies*, ed. John Neville Figgis and Reginald Vere Laurence (London, 1907), 143–74, at 144–45.

¹⁵⁰ For example, "British Trade, No. 11, Mexico and Brazil," *Fraser's Magazine* 16, no. 91 (1877): 113–22, at 113–16; see also, for the 1880s, Zevin, *Liberalism at Large*, 121; and for the start of the twentieth century, Itzel Toledo García, "Mexico through the Eyes of James and Marion Bryce," *Studies in Travel Writing* 23, no. 2 (2019): 139–57.

¹⁵¹ See, however, for postmortems, Émile de Kératry, trans. G. H. Venables, *The Rise and Fall of the Emperor Maximilian* (London, 1868); W. Harris Chynoweth, *The Fall of Maximilian* (London, 1872).

¹⁵² *Times*, 26 September 1868, 6. The cultural legacies of the episode elsewhere were more substantial; see Kristine Ibsen, *Maximilian, Mexico, and the Invention of Empire* (Nashville, 2010); Juliet Wilson-Bareau, ed., *Manet: The Execution of Maximilian: Painting, Politics and Censorship* (London, 1992); John Elderfield, *Manet and the Execution of Maximilian* (New York, 2007).

¹⁵³ Mountstuart E. Grant Duff, *A Political Survey* (Edinburgh, 1867), 150–61.

moment. A few years of excited rumination on what a radically different institutional future for the region might look like does not seem to have left a lasting impact.

The essential aspect for the British was what Mexico had done to, and revealed about, the French Second Empire. As Jonathan Parry has argued, the Liberals' vigorous negative stereotyping of Napoleon III's regime made a vital contribution to the political and electoral success of a Liberal Party that was badly divided on many domestic issues in the 1850s and 1860s, and helps explain the dominance in this era of a particular type of liberalism that privileged constitutional, moral, and patriotic issues.¹⁵⁴ The Mexican expedition was readily connected with established critical narratives about imperial France's militarism, despotism, and taste for foreign adventures. While there was still some prospect of the intervention succeeding, criticism necessarily focused on the unattractive political principles it incarnated. But with its breakdown, which turned the episode into probably the single most spectacular failure in the history of the emperor's external policy, the affair could be turned to greater advantage. Mexico's rejection of the French attempt to impose order and civilization at the point of a bayonet became an unambiguous demonstration of France's failings as a colonizing power, and of the fatal flaws of a political system in which one man conducted foreign policy by prerogative.¹⁵⁵ Liberals insisted that it was a miserable affair that had compromised France and stained its honor.¹⁵⁶ Even more significantly, the attempt to propagandize French imperial institutions had failed in embarrassing circumstances, exposing their essential fragility when transplanted beyond domestic soil, in stark contrast to the success of representative government in the British settler colonies. Here the intervention's failure contributed importantly to developing arguments about the differences between "Continental" transoceanic empire building, in which "exotic" forms of government were forced on unpropitious terrain, and England's own more "natural," rational, and successful approach to expansion.¹⁵⁷ It emphatically underlined the wisdom of Britain's repeated refusals to be drawn into territorial entanglements in Latin America, highlighting another point of superior British political wisdom. And, in the end, misguided militarism and imperial infatuation in Mexico played a significant role in bringing down Napoleon III's imperial regime.¹⁵⁸ It had put the emperor in an impossible position. Gladstone, writing in 1870, argued that the intervention had damaged the influence of France, compromised what remained of the political halo around Napoleon III, and forced him on to further abortive attempts to recover his lost position.¹⁵⁹ Mexico came to be widely described as "the Moscow of the Second Empire," and as a leading symbol and symptom of the "corruption and greed" that had "struck their fatal

¹⁵⁴ Parry, "Napoleon III."

¹⁵⁵ Compare with liberal criticisms of Disraeli in the 1870s: P. J. Durrans, "A Two-Edged Sword: The Liberal Attack on Disraelian Imperialism," *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 10, no. 3 (1982): 262–84; Peter J. Cain, "Radicalism, Gladstone, and the Liberal Critique of Disraelian Imperialism," in Bell, *Victorian Visions*, 215–38; Koebner and Schmidt, *Imperialism*, chaps. 4–6.

¹⁵⁶ Mountstuart E. Grant Duff, *A Glance over Europe* (Edinburgh, 1867), 5–6.

¹⁵⁷ *Illustrated London News*, 17 November 1866, 469. See also Middleton, "European Colonial Empires"; Zevin, *Liberalism at Large*, 126–29.

¹⁵⁸ Joseph Mazzini, "The Franco-German War," *Contemporary Review* no. 17 (1871): 1–14, at 8. This result was widely anticipated; see, for example, "France and Mexico," *Saturday Review*, 13 July 1867, 34–35.

¹⁵⁹ [Gladstone], "Germany, France, and England," 576.

fangs into the very heart of the Imperial system.”¹⁶⁰ After 1870, Liberals could make the case that the Mexican scheme had proven not only ineffective, naïve, and fundamentally wrong in principle but also fatal to the stability of the French imperial state. As such, the invasion of Mexico ended up as one of the more unexpected of the services rendered by Louis Napoleon to mid-Victorian Liberalism.

¹⁶⁰ One Who Knows Him, “The Inner Life of Napoleon,” *Gentleman’s Magazine* 7 (1871): 197–204, at 201; “Mexico and Maximilian,” *Spectator*, 6 February 1886, 203–5, at 204. See also “The Fate of Maximilian,” *Spectator*, 6 July 1867, 746.