

# A Turn Against Empire: Benito Juárez's Liberal Rejoinder to the French Intervention in Mexico

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*In the mid-nineteenth century—even as many European liberals took a “turn to empire”—Mexican President Benito Juárez and his supporters enunciated an anti-imperial, liberal vision for international politics. In the context of the French intervention, Mexican liberals rejected claims that Europe’s material progress conferred upon the continent a “civilizing mission” vis-à-vis the rest of the world. Reconfiguring liberal and republican scripts, juaristas proposed an order legitimated by popular sovereignty and based on equality among states, non-intervention, and republican fraternity. This article situates juarista liberal internationalism in its historical context and in light of recent debates over liberalism’s longstanding entanglements with empire. By uncovering this overlooked strand of anti-imperial liberalism from the periphery, this article helps to decenter debates on liberal political thought and liberalism’s international implications. The juaristas’ rejoinder, we argue, should be integral to constructing a more pluralist and global understanding of the lineages of liberal internationalism.*

## INTRODUCTION

In June 1867, Maximilian I of Mexico sat imprisoned in a convent near Querétaro awaiting his execution. Three years earlier, a French military intervention had installed the Habsburg prince as Emperor of Mexico. He faced his fate, having been abandoned by two of Europe’s most powerful men: first by his brother, the Emperor Franz Josef, and more consequentially, by France’s monarch, Napoleon III.

Not far away sat Benito Juárez. Born in rural Oaxaca, Juárez served as Mexico’s president from 1858 until his death in 1872. Juárez rose from humble roots as a Zapotec orphan in a country where the ruling class was predominately of Spanish descent. Despite learning Spanish only at the age of 12, Juárez ascended within the state apparatus to become leader of the Liberal party and the first indigenous president in the Americas. He succeeded in Mexican politics by corraling a coalition of liberals who envisioned replacing the power of the Church and Mexico’s oligarchy with a federal state founded on civil liberties, the rule of law, and constitutional government (Galeana 2006b; Hamnett 1994; Sierra [1905] 1960; Vázquez 2010). Conservatives’ opposition sparked a three-year civil


war, from which Juárez’s government emerged victorious but unable to pay its foreign debts. An ensuing intervention by European powers opened the path for France to replace Mexico’s republican government with a puppet monarchy. Years of Liberal resistance brought down the imperial experiment, culminating in Maximilian’s capture and execution in 1867.

The French intervention was a watershed in Mexican history (Pani 2001; Pani and Pi-Suñer 2015). It also reveals, we argue, contrasting visions of what it meant to organize international politics along liberal lines. On the one side, Maximilian’s presence in Mexico reflected a surge of liberal imperialism, which boasted its *mission civilisatrice* to justify European expansion (Eastman 2021; Fitzmaurice 2012; Pitts 2012; Todd 2021). The initial alliance of Britain, France, and Spain purported to instill order and progress in a “barbarous” Mexico. The ideologues of the campaign, most notably Napoleon III’s influential advisor, the Saint-Simonian Michel Chevalier, advocated tutelage over “backward” peoples (Chevalier quoted in Drolet 2008, 1270), a paternalistic view shared by the French emperor and his Habsburg protégée (Shawcross 2021).

On the other side stood the *juaristas*, who opposed with arms and argument the notion that “civilization” and “progress” could be imposed on them from without. For the *juaristas*, foreign intervention legitimated by a racialized standard of civilization was a perversion of cherished liberal principles. Facing the European invasion, the *juaristas* offered a liberal rejoinder to empire from the periphery.

Historians and political theorists extensively debate liberalism’s nineteenth-century entanglements with settler colonialism and empire. Scholars have largely focused on the liberal canon, devoting scant attention to voices outside of Europe and the United States

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(but see Hourani [1962] 1983; C. Bayly 2011). Similarly, Latin American thinkers have been overlooked or treated as passive consumers of liberal political thought (but see Aguilar Rivera 2012; Jaksic and Carbó 2011; Pérez Muñoz *Forthcoming*). This is especially true for accounts on the origins and development of liberal internationalism, which treat Latin America as an object of European and U.S. imperialism and rarely as a source of original thinking (but see Fawcett 2012; Grandin 2012; Long 2018; Scarfi 2016; Thornton and Rodriguez 2022).

Our discussion of *juarista* thought advances efforts to decenter the intellectual history of liberal internationalism. As Bell (2016, 19–20) notes, by the 1860s, liberals largely agreed that free trade and international law would foster human progress. However, beyond this doctrinal core, self-declared liberals endorsed different and often contradictory positions. Like with work on anti-imperialist and anti-racist thought by Getachew (2019) and Go (2023), we argue that studying the responses of liberals from outside the “core” is crucial for understanding the global intellectual history of liberal internationalist thought (see also Moyn and Sartori 2013). Mexicans’ anti-imperial liberalism—itsself deeply rooted in experiences of great power politics, colonialism, and republicanism—should be integrated into liberal internationalism’s fraught history.

Despite sharing certain liberal values with Maximilian and Napoleon III, *juaristas* understood their fight for self-determination as a defense of first-order liberal principles. Rejecting the civilizing justifications for European imperialism in the Americas, the *juaristas* articulated their own vision, grounded in popular sovereignty, legal equality, and non-intervention. Fraternity among the American republics, including the United States, would distinguish the Western Hemisphere from the “old world” and sow the seeds of a more just international order (Long and Schulz 2022).

In what follows, we first discuss the evolution of liberal internationalism and its “turn to empire.” Then, drawing on the collected papers of Juárez and other primary sources, we explore the *juaristas*’ critique of imperialism and outline their liberal alternative. We conclude by discussing the importance of *juarista* thought and practice to a pluralist, decentered understanding of liberal internationalism’s origins.

## LIBERAL INTERNATIONALISM AND EMPIRE

Political theorists and intellectual historians have amply demonstrated that domestic and international factors, namely imperialism, were intertwined in liberalism’s evolution. Many canonical liberal thinkers were involved in European expansionism and supported imperial “civilizing missions,” critics note (Bell 2016; Mehta 1999; Pitts 2006). However, such complicity was not unanimous; scholars point to other self-declared liberals who opposed empire (Fitzmaurice 2012; Sylvester 2009). Prominent accounts of liberal internationalism likewise diverge on the tradition’s links to

imperialism. Some see liberal internationalism as a Kantian paradigm or a Wilsonian political project that has advanced peace among nations (Doyle 1983; Ikenberry 2020); others view invocations of liberal internationalism as little more than a smokescreen for racial and imperial hierarchies (Mazower 2013; Morefield 2005). The ideas of U.S. and European liberals have occupied the foreground in these debates. Liberal perspectives from outside the “core” have been mostly absent, with several notable exceptions. Below, we sketch the contours of these related literatures and situate *juaristas*’ thought in the lineage of liberal internationalism.

## A Turn to Empire?

A quarter-century ago, Mehta (1999, 1) argued that while rooted in “an intellectual tradition and experiences that were substantially European,” liberalism owed its development to interactions with the wider world. British liberals’ universal language was belied by parochialism and complicity in expanding colonial ventures. Canonical liberal thinkers not only rationalized imperialism, but also frequently derived personal benefits from it—from John Locke’s stake in American settler colonialism to John Stuart Mill’s career in the British East India Company (Jahn 2013; Mehta 1999; Pitts 2006).

Scholars debate whether liberalism’s imbrication in empire during the nineteenth century represented a shift in liberal thought or merely revealed intrinsic imperialist tendencies. Pitts (2006) posits that liberalism took a “turn to empire” in the mid-nineteenth century—leaving behind the greater pluralism of Adam Smith, Jeremy Bentham, and Benjamin Constant. By contrast, nineteenth-century liberals adopted an increasingly dichotomous vision of the world, infused with growing confidence in the superiority of European civilization.

Rather than seeing a singular “turn,” Bell (2016) argues that liberals’ entanglements with settler colonialism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries suggest a more consistent endorsement of empire. Armitage (2004) and Jahn (2013) contend that colonial expansion was intrinsic to Locke’s understanding of liberty and property. Colonialism permitted a shared political project among white men, but that liberal project was premised on the appropriation of supposedly unimproved land from indigenous peoples in North America. Liberals’ support for settler colonialism, these critics posit, was more persistent and uniform than their attitudes toward imperial rule over foreign polities (see also Mantena 2010, 182–5; Mehta 1999, 47–9).

Despite these disagreements on the timing and extent of imperial entanglements, most scholars agree that Europe’s wealth and power inspired a growing sense of superiority among the continent’s liberals during the nineteenth century. Understandings of history as progressive and stadial grew more cohesive, leading many liberals to believe in their societies’ civilizing mission. This idea represented “the most fully

developed moral justification of empire in nineteenth-century Britain” (Mantena 2010, 21). The hardening of civilizational categories responded to, and then justified, coexisting support for liberalism at home and imperialism overseas (Pitts 2006).

Liberal imperialists codified these justifications through what was later dubbed the “standard of civilization.” For John Stuart Mill, Europe’s progress almost demanded an exercise of power over non-European others—at least until they had advanced to full membership in the family of civilized nations (Mehta 1999, chap. 3; Keene 2002; Pitts 2006, 11–20). In “A Few Words on Non-intervention,” Mill ([1859] 1984, 118–9) defended British and French actions in India and Algeria, respectively. Reciprocity, the basis of the international legal order, was conditional on civilizational status. “To characterize any conduct whatever toward a barbarous people as a violation of the law of nations,” Mill wrote, “only shows that he who so speaks has never considered the subject. ... [B]arbarians have no rights as a *nation*.” European “civilizing missions,” then, were at the heart of liberalism’s fusion to empire.

While British thinkers remain the most studied, scholars also have re-examined French imperial liberalism. Alexis de Tocqueville defended French rule in Algiers, and many French liberals supported imperial expansion in the ensuing decades (Pitts 2012, 262–3; Todd 2021). For de Tocqueville, colonial ventures allowed for stabilizing liberal rule at home (Saada 2017). Later French thinkers added to these justifications an emphasis on France’s cultural prowess and material progress. This was the case of Michel Chevalier, Napoleon III’s advisor, and chief ideologue of the Mexican intervention. Chevalier left a mark in liberalism’s history as an architect of the Anglo-French agreement (1860) that heralded a shift toward free trade. As a Saint-Simonian, Chevalier believed in states’ active role in fostering social and economic change (Drolet 2008). Interest in large-scale infrastructure projects drew Chavalier’s attention to Mexico as a potential site for an interoceanic canal (Galeana 2006a). After a visit there in the 1830s, he argued France should exercise tutelage over “lethargic” Latin peoples (Chevalier 1836, xii–xiii). Writing about Panama in 1844, Chevalier echoed Locke’s theory of property. Superior civilization entailed a “law of confiscation against those states that do not know how to make use of the *talent* that God has bestowed upon them” (Chevalier, quoted in Drolet 2008, 1270). While Chevalier recognized Spanish American polities as independent states, he nonetheless insisted that France had a duty to exploit the region’s resources for the cause of human advancement. Such arguments about reform and progress allowed European liberals to justify intervention to “help” unfamiliar societies climb the civilizational ladder (Mehta 1999, 77–8).

Where Mexico and Spanish America fell in this civilizational hierarchy—and with what consequences for the legitimacy of intervention—was “eminently debatable” (Middleton 2023, 376). But the region was consistently portrayed as backward and in need of some external tutelage (Schulz 2014). Advocates of

the intervention emphasized Mexico’s political disorder and supposedly deficient population to justify Europeans’ right and responsibility to uplift those they considered “uncivilized.” Mexico’s liminality made it an important, and hotly contested, case for hashing out the limits of liberal imperialism (De la Rosa 2022; Middleton 2023; Salomon 1975).

## An Emerging Liberal Internationalism

Scholars of International Relations place liberal internationalism’s consolidation as a self-conscious worldview in the early twentieth century (see Ashworth 2023; Sluga 2013). Foundational liberal internationalists argued that the moral principles of domestic liberal society should be applied internationally through the expansion of democracy, free trade, and international organization. Doing so would promote human progress and peace—including by eliminating war among democratic states. Although contemporary theorists suggest a similar period of consolidation in the interwar interregnum, they diverge over the tradition’s antecedents and trajectory. For instance, Doyle (1983) places the roots of liberal internationalism in the three definitive articles—republican government, pacific union, and cosmopolitan right—of Kant’s *Perpetual Peace*.<sup>1</sup> In contrast, Ikenberry (2020) emphasizes liberal internationalism’s evolution as it passed from British to U.S. leadership. The U.S. promotion of international organization and free trade after both world wars converted liberalism’s abstract aspirations into an increasingly constitutional liberal international order. The progressive development of this order, Ikenberry suggests, has ameliorated liberal internationalism’s vestiges of imperialism. In response, numerous scholars have criticized liberal International Relations theory for downplaying historical and ongoing imperialism (Jahn 2013; Morefield 2005).

The fusion of state power with liberalism was central to the emergence of liberal internationalist thought in the United States and Europe. As Bell (2016, 19–20) writes, “By 1860 liberals of different stripes were beginning to converge on a relatively stable ‘internationalist’ doctrine that championed the benefits of conjoining international commerce and international law.” Despite those shared tenets, early liberal internationalists disagreed on many other points—and quite centrally on the place of empire. Liberal critiques of empire crystalized in the mid-nineteenth century, including from the British free trader Richard Cobden, who negotiated the 1860 trade treaty with Chevalier (Howe 2009; Sylvester 2009). Among international lawyers, Fitzmaurice (2012, 124) argues, “even at its most pro-imperial, liberalism was characterized by conflict over empire, rather than doctrine.” Yet this recognition of liberal internationalism’s multivocality foregrounds U.S. and

<sup>1</sup> For Doyle, Kant’s critique of colonialism makes his third article anti-imperial. Valdez (2017) contends the article has been read without historical context; instead, Kant’s anti-imperialism was an artifact of concerns about European republican peace.



European voices. To the extent that “peripheral” contributions have been recovered, they are often approached as anti-imperialist dissent instead of as constitutive of the liberal tradition.

In this article, we claim a space for Mexican liberals’ contributions to this anti-imperial liberal critique. Not only did *juaristas* add a voice from those who found themselves on the receiving end of imperialism, but their vision of international order differed from their European contemporaries in important aspects. For instance, Cobden opposed formal empire and the intervention in Mexico, but he nevertheless saw Mexicans as racially inferior: “the people of that Country are sunk in a state of degradation & demoralization which incapacitates them for self-government.—They are a mixed population of negroes, Indians, & Spaniards, intermarried until the European race is in a minority with only one bond of Union—the Roman Catholic faith in its very lowest development” (Cobden 1863, 415; see also Phillips 2012). These views mirrored the justifications of British and French imperialists. Crucially, while many *juaristas* accepted stadial ideas of human progress, they vehemently rejected the view that differences in societal development justified foreign impositions.

### Peripheral Liberal Internationalisms

If canonical liberals’ views of the world have received longstanding attention, studies of a genuine liberal internationalist tradition outside Europe and the United States have only recently gained traction (e.g., Hiruta 2023; Holley 2024). “Despite the rich, diverse and newly available critical histories” of liberalism, Thakur (2021, 12) explains, “we do not yet have many narratives that center non-western actors as co-creators, or protagonists in their own right, in advancing and reforming the liberal international project. The typical non-western actor in these histories is absent, or petitioning (usually being spoken on behalf of by western interlocutors), or staunchly resistant to the liberal international order.”

There are important exceptions, however. Classically, Albert Hourani ([1962] 1983) pointed to late Ottomans and the Egyptian Rifa’a al-Tahtawi as figures who sought to fuse liberalism, nationalism, and education in an Arab political context. Scholars, including Howland (2001) and Fung (2010), examined the reception of liberalism in China and Japan. C.A. Bayly (2011, 10) noted that Indian writers drew on liberalism and international law to contest the British colonial state. Indian liberals deployed John Stuart Mill to criticize the overreach of state power, but “cannily ignored” his notion that Indians were “like children, in need of direction by benign imperial authority” (13). Scholarship highlights the role of Rammohan Roy in these early intellectual exchanges (Zastoupil 2010). Recent accounts have pointed to the influence of liberalism in shaping views of world politics from the peripheries of international order—for instance, Martin Bayly’s (2023) work on International Relations in India (see also, Thakur 2021). Likewise, Fung (2010,

145) argues that the Chinese liberal nationalist Liang Qichao “conceived of an ideal international community grounded in the basic liberal ideas of equal rights and autonomy.”

Recent scholarship uncovers Latin America’s role in the development of the liberal international order, especially in light of the region’s relationship with the United States. A vast literature examines anti-imperialist resistance in the region as a response to great-power interventions—although rarely placing this resistance within the liberal tradition (but see Gobat 2013; Sanders 2014). More directly, IR scholars and diplomatic historians illustrate how Latin Americans have engaged with the creation of norms and institutions, especially through diplomacy and international law (Becker Lorca 2014; Long 2018; Scarfi 2017; Thornton and Rodriguez 2022). In this line of thought, Greg Grandin (2012) argues that Latin Americans’ concepts of individual rights and sovereignty diverged from those of North Atlantic liberals but nonetheless reflected a liberal worldview. For many authors, Latin America’s peripheral position and “Creole consciousness” is generative of this line of political thought (Fawcett 2012; Obregón 2006; Simon 2017). Hooker (2009, 68; 2017) shows that these liberals’ experiences with the racial underpinnings of international order sharpened their critique of global inequality. Her work connects with a growing exploration of Latin America as a site of theoretical innovation that is “both Western and marginal simultaneously” (Hooker 2017, 68).

Indeed, liberalism and its cousin, republicanism, were inextricable elements of Latin America’s political development, shaping emancipation from Spain, nation-state building, and the creation of political parties (Aguilar Rivera and Rojas 2014; Hale 1990; Jaksic and Carbó 2011). Rojas (2002) and Simon (2017) each demonstrate that Spanish American political elites’ “creole” visions reclaimed higher positions in European-dominated international hierarchies, while simultaneously defending their right to rule over indigenous, black, and mixed-race populations. Sanders (2014) contends that Spanish America’s progressive constitutions and enlightened reformers put these republics at “the vanguard of the Atlantic world” in the mid-nineteenth century. Sabato (2018) similarly highlights regional innovations in liberal republicanism. In short, liberals in the region considered themselves to be part of a political tradition that connected them to their peers in Europe and the United States—despite the poverty and political instability that affected their societies.

Before these recent works, Latin America’s nineteenth-century liberalism was long overlooked or denigrated as derivative of European and U.S. models (Aguilar Rivera 2012; Jaksic and Posada-Carbó 2011; Pérez Muñoz *Forthcoming*). Even now, the region’s liberalism remains mostly marginal in global histories of political thought (e.g., Rosenblatt 2018). Accounts of liberalism in the period accord little importance to the French intervention in Mexico; when they do, the episode illustrates European imperialism but not

Mexican agency (e.g., De la Rosa 2022; Middleton 2023; Shawcross 2021).

Mexicans directly felt the sharp end of liberal imperialism but nonetheless defended their country in the name of liberalism. Yet, their ideas about international politics remain largely underexplored, even in the national historiography and extensive biographical literature on Juárez.<sup>2</sup> This absence may relate to the nature of sources from the period; neither Juárez nor his co-partisans penned treatises on their political thought—even less so regarding international affairs. In reconstructing *juarista* liberal internationalism, we draw on correspondence, speeches, newspaper articles and pamphlets, and a re-reading of secondary sources. The central source is the thirteen-volume collection, *Benito Juárez: documentos, discursos y correspondencia* (Tamayo [1964] 2017); we have complemented this with collected documents and publications of other key Liberals, the main Liberal newspaper *El Siglo Diez y Nueve*, biographical texts, and archival research.

Under Juárez, we argue, Mexico was an active proponent of alternative liberal internationalist visions. *Juaristas* supported the expansion of property rights, advocated free trade, and favored many forms of international cooperation that converged, superficially at least, with European liberal internationalist projects. However, *juaristas* rejected imperialism and civilizing missions imposed from abroad, questioning both the vestiges of “old diplomacy” and rising inter-imperial collusion. European empires’ promotion of unified international rules—on debts, for example—came at Mexico’s expense and without its input. Instead, Mexican liberals foregrounded anti-imperialist values of popular sovereignty, equality, non-intervention, and fraternity.

## A JUARISTA LIBERAL INTERNATIONALISM

In 1855, Mexican Liberals rose to power through a revolt against the authoritarian Antonio López de Santa Anna, rallying around calls for a new constitution aimed at establishing a liberal state, curtailing the power of the Catholic Church, and enshrining civil liberties. Juárez returned from his exile in New Orleans to support the liberal cause, serving as the Governor of Oaxaca and joining the Cabinet to enact judicial reform. In 1857, Liberals promulgated a new charter and elected Juárez President of the Supreme Court. This positioned Juárez as immediate successor to the presidency when Ignacio Comonfort’s failed self-coup in 1858 prompted the latter’s resignation and ignited a civil war.

After seizing Mexico City, Conservative opponents of the liberal constitution installed a parallel government and solicited support from European powers.

Forced out of the capital, Juárez sought financial and military aid from the United States in the so-called Reform War. The Liberal victory in 1860 allowed Juárez to return to the capital, where he called for elections to confirm his presidency. With the government’s coffers emptied by war, Mexico suspended foreign debt payments. The moratorium provoked a joint response from Britain, France, and Spain—the Convention of London, in which the powers agreed to intervene militarily without interfering in Mexico’s internal affairs or seizing territory (Bock 2017). However, behind the scenes, Napoleon III and his Spanish wife Empress Eugénie were scheming with monarchist Mexican exiles. Arch-Conservatives such as the banished politician José María Gutiérrez de Estrada hoped that such a plan would bring order to Mexico and strengthen the Catholic faith against secularism and the encroaching protestant power of the United States. For Napoleon III, this juncture presented an opportunity to install a client emperor who would revive French grandeur, exploit Mexico’s riches, and halt U.S. expansionism. In late 1861, Juárez confronted an intervention that swiftly morphed into a full-fledged project for regime change.

The *juaristas*’ liberal internationalism was an organic outgrowth of a domestic political project that pitted them against Mexican Conservatives and their foreign allies. However, these views became more cohesive in the context of the French intervention. *Juaristas* rejected European liberals’ justification for empire and advanced their own anti-imperial vision. This “*juarista* internationalism” emanated from republican values and training in political philosophy, political economy, and the law of nations (Galeana 2006a, 347; Lempérière 1994). The *juarista* critique linked imperialism not with liberalism but with dynastic practices, including the power politics that had repressed Europe’s “springtime of nations” of 1848. *Juaristas* built on the Spanish American liberal tradition that had emerged in the 1812 Cádiz constitution and the wars of independence. For Mexican liberals, overcoming the vestiges of Spanish colonialism in Mexican society would allow them to succeed where the Europeans of 1848 had failed. From the vantage of the intervened, the so-called liberal imperialism of the European intervention was an existential threat to this project. Furthermore, it denied the core tenets of liberal republicanism: self-determination, popular sovereignty, constitutionalism, and equality under the law (Long and Schulz 2022).

In the following, we set out the principles of *juarista* liberal internationalism. Even though many Mexican liberals accepted stadial theories of human progress, they rejected the foreign imposition of civilizing missions, coercive tutelage, and intervention in states legitimated by popular consent. Instead, *juaristas* proposed an anti-imperial, and genuinely liberal, international order in which states based on popular consent were equals under international law, regardless of their military power, economic development, or internal disorder. The principle of sovereign equality barred interventions, including those that aimed to collect debts or enforce the claims of foreign nationals

<sup>2</sup> While liberalism receives ample attention in Mexico’s national historiography (Breña 2021; Hale 1990; Knight 1985; Reyes Heróles 1957), pre-revolutionary internationalism has been largely overlooked.

(Sikkink 1997). For *juaristas*, the antidote to dynastic collusion would be fraternity (sometimes also “solidarity”), which connected the political futures of republics to aspirations for an American and, eventually, trans-Atlantic liberal order.

## Rejecting the Civilizing Mission

*Juaristas* recognized that Europeans had relegated them to a lower rung on the civilizational ladder. In response, they challenged the idea of civilizational hierarchy as an international organizing principle, particularly one that accorded a right to intervene. At the same time, *juaristas* often found themselves trapped within the same conceptual language and believed that enacting a civilizing mission domestically was imperative for Mexico’s progress.

As scholars of liberalism and empire demonstrate, the British and French employed a racialized, civilizational discourse to legitimate imperial expansion in supposedly “backward” societies. Liberalism’s turn to empire was also noticeable in Spain, which launched interventions in the Americas and North Africa, reaching an apogee during the Liberal Union in the 1860s (Eastman 2021). European diplomats used similar language to assert their right to intervene in Mexico. Their intervention would, they claimed, “raise Mexico from its prostration and give impulse to a regenerating project” (Sierra 1960, 411). European critics assigned various causes for Mexico’s failings: the large indigenous population, racial mixing, Catholicism and colonial legacies, and chaotic republican governments. One British diplomat opined that Mexico’s condition “should be attributed to the bad inclinations of a vitiated people that bears sole responsibility for a state of things which has no precedent in the annals of the civilized world” (Wyke to Zamacona, July 30, 1861, in Tamayo 2017, t. 4, v. XXXVII, doc. 29). Mexico’s “anarchy” allowed the British to assert their own role as agents of progress.

The French likewise trumpeted their *mission civilisatrice*. In the early 1850s, the French filibusterer Count Gaston de Raoussett-Boulbon invaded Sonora, Mexico, to impose progress—only to be executed by Mexicans. The presumption of a potentially rich but “degenerate” Mexico outlasted Raoussett-Boulbon to become a core rationale for intervention. Like his advisor Chevalier, Napoleon III was taken with plans for a French-imposed “regeneration” of Mexico in the name of a Latin race (de la Fuente to Foreign Ministry, Aug. 20, 1861, in Tamayo 2017, t. 4, v. XXXVII, doc. 48; Barker 1979). Claims of a French civilizing mission were infused with portrayals of Mexican inferiority. These depictions equated Mexicans with Arabs as “beneficiaries” of French conquest. As a Zapotec man, Juárez was the target of vituperative racial attacks. The *Revue des Deux Mondes* described the president as “a short little Indian, agitated and stubborn, of a narrow mind, without talent, and violent” (quoted in Salomon 1975, 24). In line with such stereotypes, many expected servility from Juárez. After

Maximilian’s execution, Juárez’s indigeneity was linked to vengeance and bloodlust (Portail 1994, 50–9).

In the years before the intervention, Mexican liberals rarely questioned the view of Mexico as lagging behind Europe and the United States. While rejecting notions that Mexicans were “barbarous,” *juarista* efforts to subvert such claims often echoed the racial underpinnings of the standard of civilization. For instance, Juárez once argued that European claims of supposed Mexican anarchy and a need for intervention were “impossible to sustain before a government that is certainly not of Hottentots” (Juárez to Romero, June 5, 1856, in Tamayo 2017, t. 2, v. VI, doc. 28). Nonetheless, U.S. and European material progress did not confer a monopoly on right or virtue, he countered: millions lived in poverty in England while British colonial ventures in Ireland and India faced great opposition (Juárez, Oct. 31, 1858, in Tamayo 2017, t. 2, v. XI, doc. 30).

The rejection of foreign imposition resonated with *juaristas*. Denouncing early schemes to transplant a European monarch to Mexico, Liberal scribe, governor, and *juarista* foreign minister Melchor Ocampo declared, “the nation...does not need the offices of tutors” (Ocampo, April 28, 1859, in Tamayo 2017, t. 3, v. XXIV, doc. 17). However, Juárez and his representatives used commonplaces like “civilized nations”—even while contesting Europeans’ right to designate others as “uncivilized.” After the defeat of the French, Mexican diplomat Matías Romero denounced that his country had been treated “as a semi-barbarous state by the European nations,” while praising the United States’ “wise policy of treating Mexico as an equal to all the other civilized nations” (quoted in Hamnett 1994, 162). Despite using, and at least tacitly accepting, civilizational language, *juaristas* disdained the notion that civilization could be imposed from abroad, especially in the case of Mexico.

The French intervention prompted *juaristas* to reconsider other civilizational conceits. Mexican liberals had often been Francophiles, but now questioned whether France truly represented the paragon of progress. Liberal journalist, former foreign minister, and presidential confidante, Francisco Zarco, captured the *juaristas*’ wartime mood when he wrote, “We can very well rid ourselves of these high lessons of diplomacy and civilization” (quoted in Castañeda Batres 1961, 226). The intervention also led *juaristas* to make broader, anti-imperialist critiques. Liberals denounced France’s attempts to make Mexico into a “new Algiers,” condemning aggressions in North Africa in the process. The author of an 1867 manifesto justifying Maximilian’s execution (apocryphally attributed to Juárez<sup>3</sup>) mocked European pretenses: “Holy God! These monarchs are Christian and boast about being

<sup>3</sup> Although the *Manifiesto justificativo de los castigos nacionales en Querétaro* has long been attributed to Benito Juárez, recent research demonstrates that the piece was likely penned by another prominent Mexican Liberal, reflecting *juarista* thought. Aceves Ávila (N.d.) thanks to Erika Pani and Oliva García de León.



civilized!” Rejecting French colonialism, the author decried how “Louis Napoleon ‘regenerated’ the Arabs of Algiers” by applying “a law of extermination against an independent people,” citing an 1852 massacre. The manifesto ranted against the hypocrisy of European imperialism, slave trading, and “disastrous wars” in the interests of monarchs and “diplomacy disguised as the common good” (2010, 48–53).

Mexican liberals had long boasted of their abolition of slavery in contrast with its continuation in the “more advanced” United States. In the midst of the French intervention and the U.S. Civil War, they reinforced their condemnations of U.S. slavery and stressed Mexico’s relative racial equality. Likewise, *juaristas* rebuked Europe’s racial logics of international stratification. “I do not believe that Nature has made different sets of rules for each people, or for each family of people called races,” Romero told an audience of New York heavyweights, including Theodore Roosevelt, Sr., in 1868. “It is, in my opinion, wiser to suppose that Providence controls mankind by the same code of rules, which are equally applicable to the Anglo-Saxon as to the Latin races—to the Indians as to the Africans” (quoted in Wilkerson 1988, 31–2).

Views of race and indigeneity varied among *juaristas*, but in the eyes of many Mexican liberals, indigenous communities had been held back by inadequate education and the pernicious influences of the Church and Spanish colonial legacies. Addressing the French foreign minister, Juárez’s envoy in Paris pointed to the achievements of Mexico’s liberal reforms, including the “elevation and fraternity of the races, which the Spanish government for so long had maintained in a state of abject degradation and perfect antagonism” (de la Fuente to Thouvenel, March 7, 1862, in Tamayo 2017, t. 6, v. XLVIII, doc. 41).

Yet, by emphasizing the national government’s role in advancing progress, Mexican liberals could become ensnared in the logics of colonialism. Many *juaristas* advocated an internal civilizing mission directed at Mexico’s indigenous communities; some even promoted “whitening” the population through immigration, education, and *mestizaje*. This ambivalence toward race marked official policy after the war and even influenced the thought of later Mexican anti-imperialists like José Vasconcelos (Hooker 2017). Unlike the anti-imperial tradition that informed decolonization in the twentieth century (Getachew 2019), the *juaristas* did not make anti-racism a cornerstone of their refutation of civilizing missions. Instead, their rebuttal was closely connected to calls for non-domination and the equality of popularly legitimated sovereign states. As Valdez (2017) argues with respect to Kant, the emphasis on the rights of republics could be anti-imperial without necessarily questioning racial and civilizational hierarchies in their entirety.

The defeat of the French produced a new self-confidence among Mexican liberals, who insisted on the country’s capacity to chart its own course without any foreign imposition. Mexicans possessed “very many of the virtues which constitute a free people,” fully capable of self-government, Romero exclaimed

(quoted in Wilkerson 1988, 33). Perhaps this was the ultimate point of the war. Mexican liberals would lead the country on its own path as “faithful guardians of the law, the intransigent defenders of the rights of humanity, and the strong arm of the civilization of this century” (Santos Degollado, quoted in Sierra 1960, 144).

## Popular Sovereignty

As the cornerstone of *juaristas*’ understanding of legitimate statehood, popular sovereignty granted membership in international society and cast French justifications for intervention as a betrayal of the liberal creed. Mexican republicans’ attachment to ideals of popular sovereignty arose during the country’s independence struggles (Chang 2023; Sierra 1960, 188), and remained central to the liberal project during the following decades. Ocampo argued in 1858, “Our political dogma is the sovereignty of the people, the will of the majority” (Ocampo 1901, 28). Liberals waved the flag of popular sovereignty against centralizing conservatives who had the support of the Church, military, and European allies. In resisting the French intervention—an extension and internationalization of the earlier civil war—*juaristas* again fought in the name of sovereignty, law, and constitutionalism (Hamnett 1994, 73; Pani 2017). This invocation of popular sovereignty foreshadowed the later liberal internationalist emphasis on self-determination.

*Juaristas* interpreted the intervention as an attempt to revive dynasticism and to deny Spanish American republics their rightful place in international society. The popular will, rather than lineage and tradition, granted governments the right to speak in the name of nations. Napoleon III’s plan to establish a monarchy in Mexico, then, was an usurpation of popular sovereignty and inextricably illiberal. Maximilian was well aware of the challenges his reign would face from a population accustomed to republican institutions. Even before embarking, he insisted that the French and a handful of Mexican monarchists orchestrate some manifestations of popular support, including a petition from Conservative notables and a hastily arranged plebiscite in French-occupied areas. *Juaristas* mocked these efforts as a farce. Popular sovereignty, they argued, was incompatible with rule imposed from abroad, regardless of how liberal they appeared to be (e.g., Zarco quoted in Castañeda Batres 1961, 96).

Mexican liberals sought to transform popular sovereignty into an international legal principle. Having been chased from Mexico City during the Reform War and again by approaching French forces, *juaristas* argued that diplomatic recognition should follow from constitutionality and popular will—not control of the capital or the balance of foreign sympathies (Ocampo to Robles Pezuela, March 2, 1858, in Tamayo 2017, t. 2, v. X, doc. 49).

Popular sovereignty also justified economic policy, notably the fateful debt moratorium of 1861. *Juaristas* offered to negotiate with creditors about repayment but not on the authority of the Mexican Congress,

Mexico's independence, or its form of government. When the expected invasion came, Mexican liberals demanded the recognition of the Juárez government as a precondition to talks with imperial forces—a promise the French soon ignored (Bock 2017). What was soon impossible for the French to ignore was the fierce popular opposition. As Juan Prim, the commander of the Spanish forces, prepared to abandon the intervention, he impressed upon Napoleon III the poor prospect for the monarchy. Mexico's proximity to the United States and political independence "had created habits and customs and certainly a republican language that would not be easy to destroy" (Letter to Napoleon III, March 17, 1862, cited in Eastman 2021, 152). Indeed, armed resistance from liberal guerrillas committed to republicanism and federalism made Mexico ungovernable for Maximilian's empire, converting Napoleon III's dreams of a rich colony into a boondoggle (Thomson and LaFrance 2001).

After six years of war, *juaristas'* victory reaffirmed Mexico's independence. Popular sovereignty was central to the government's rationale for putting Maximilian before a military tribunal, and ultimately for executing him. The former archduke was charged as "a usurper of the sovereignty of the people," who had violated Mexican rights and the law of nations (Interrogatorio, May 25, 1867, in Tamayo 2017, t. 12, v. CCXIII, doc. 3). In accusations against Maximilian, citations of Grotius, Vattel, and Wheaton were followed by references to clauses on popular sovereignty in the 1857 constitution (Requisitoria del Fiscal Azpíroz, in Tamayo 2017, t. 12, v. CCXVIII, doc. 20). The tribunal rebranded the intervention's liberal imperialist proponents as illiberal filibusterers. Meanwhile, liberal Mexico was favorably contrasted with "a modern Europe that has lost the idea of popular sovereignty," giving free rein to despots' imperial excesses (Juárez [apocryphal] 2010).

Maximilian's execution was just in light of his assault on Mexico's popular sovereignty and international personhood. European powers stood accused of attempted "nacioncide" (*nacioncidio*) against Mexico. They had tried to subject Mexico to the sorts of capitulations forced on the Ottoman Empire and deployed in recent colonial expansions in Algeria and Morocco (Juárez [apocryphal] 2010). For *juaristas*, the victory—culminating in Mexico's "second independence" (Pani 2017, 586)—demanded a new international order with legitimate membership based on popular sovereignty, equality, and non-intervention.

## Sovereign Equality

*Juaristas* paired their emphasis on popular sovereignty with a commitment to equality under the law. In doing so, they extended into the international sphere their battle against the corporate legal privileges of the Church and military, the so-called *fueros* (Hamnett 1994, 96–8, 104–10). *Juaristas* aspired to reform the law of nations into a tool for equal treatment regardless of a state's wealth, power, internal constitution, or ascribed civilizational status.

Many Mexican liberals, including Juárez, were well-schooled in the law of nations. Although *juaristas* cited canonical texts, they did not accept the international legal practices of their time uncritically. Instead, *juaristas* drew on law to make a case for states' equality and rights as the basis of an order that would supersede the "old diplomacy" of dynastic international society. They used international legal arguments to place themselves in the right, to decry violations of principles, and to demand rectification. Sovereign equality was to be a check on the domination of smaller states by great powers.

A prominent example was *juaristas'* denunciation of unequal treaties and the interventions of great powers. For instance, the Juárez government denied the validity of the Mon-Almonte Treaty between the Spanish crown and a de facto Conservative government in Mexico, arguing the pact was so unequal that it "present[ed] the republic as if it were a horde of bandits unfit to belong to the great family of civilized peoples" (Lafragua to Minister, Dec. 14, 1859, in Tamayo 2017, t. 2, v. XIII, doc. 32). Such a treatment was inadmissible for a state that had won its independence and established a liberal government.

Even before the French intervention, the *juarista* rejoinder to unequal treaties and gunboat diplomacy emphasized sovereign equality as a general principle, drawing on a republican understanding of international law that had gained traction in the Americas (Fawcett 2012). For *juaristas*, the law of nations must apply equally to sovereigns both strong and weak, if it was to be considered law at all. Mexico's international commitments must be "in accordance with the law of nations, and that the consideration of its weakness or power, of its good or bad political organization, does not influence the settlement of difference. It wishes to be treated as a free and sovereign people" (Juárez et al., Jan. 30, 1860, in Tamayo 2017, t. 2, vol. XIV, doc. 13.). In a dispute with Spain over a captured frigate the Mexican minister responded that "even a sense of weakness should never make one forget for a moment the dignity and rights of the republic," before launching into a legal dissertation with citations to Wheaton's *The Elements of International Law*, Reath's *Commentaries on American Law*, and even the handbook of Spanish naval regulations (de Emparan to del Camino, Aug. 4, 1860, in Tamayo 2017, t. 2, vol. XIV, doc. 125). Writing a British diplomat, another *juarista* minister cited Grotius, Wheaton, Corcello, Martens, and Heffter to support Mexico's sovereign right to suspend debt payments if they conflicted with national survival (Zamacona to Wyke, July 27, 1861, in Tamayo 2017, t. 4, v. XXXVII, 101–2). Not only would the *juaristas* insist on equality under international law, but they sought to demonstrate their equal competence as international lawyers.

Juárez continued this line of argumentation in the wake of the intervention, which he denounced in 1862 as a "declaration of war against the Law of nations" (Secretaría de la Presidencia 1976, 82). Juárez was no utopian; he understood that liberals' aspirations for international law were not reflected in the conduct of



the European powers. The French had illustrated international law's hypocrisies, and armed resistance would have to save Mexico where international law could not (Secretaría de la Presidencia 1976, 79). Zarco set out the Mexican view in stark terms:

If a weak and poor power had committed such a scandalous violation of the law of nations like that of France, breaking in a single moment the Convention of London and the Preliminaries of La Soledad, there would be a unanimous clamor to condemn its conduct, and the aggrieved nations would have resolved to punish it, declaring it barbarous and unfit to exist. But France is not Cochinchina [a region of Vietnam invaded by France in 1862], which in plain language means that the science of Grotius, of Puffendorf [*sic*], Vattel, and Wheaton does not apply the same way to the weak as to the strong, to the strong as to the rich, and that the perfect equality of nations before the principles of the law of nations is and long has been a chimera (quoted in Castañeda Batres 1961, 99).

Juárez's defeat of the French moved sovereign equality from the quills of diplomats to the rifles of the firing squad; the execution of Maximilian was justified under international law, as the response of an aggrieved sovereign to a piratical invasion, Juárez and other Mexican liberals argued (Hamnett 1994, 188–9). Victory against a leading power demonstrated that Mexico's standing must be respected. To drive home this point, Juárez cut relations with European powers that had recognized Maximilian's empire (Secretaría de la Presidencia 1976, 87). The balance had shifted, and new relations would be established on a different footing—one of sovereign equality. This insistence on the dignity of smaller states became the core of the *Doctrina Juárez*, which continued to inform Mexico's later foreign policy (Cosío Villegas 1962).

## Non-Intervention and National Treatment

At the time of the intervention, legal principles permitted great powers to coerce the small over nonpayment of debts and the protection of foreign nationals. *Juaristas* rejected such interference as illegitimate. Pecuniary claims from private bondholders were part of the common economic order, “not a government-to-government matter,” and therefore beyond the pale of international law. Private debts could not be a *casus belli*, because the dispute was “a question of money and nothing else” (Zarco quoted in Castañeda Batres 1961, 98).

Interventions in Latin America had long invoked the right to protect the private property of foreign nationals. Great power intimidation had illiberal consequences. Writing years before the Convention of London, Mexican liberals were already wary of diplomatic protection. In 1856, Zarco criticized how “European diplomatic missions, with a few exceptions, are reduced to agencies of audacious speculators, of smugglers and profiteers who wrap themselves in the flags of powerful nations” (quoted in Castañeda Batres 1961, 206). These practices removed foreigners from the purview of Mexican justice, effectively creating

another *fuero*. All the while, *juaristas* argued, speculators profited from Mexico's internal upheavals. Europeans portrayed their intrusions as necessary to ensure Mexico met its international commitments, but history showed that foreign interventions disrupted the economy, undermined the means for repayment, and added to the debt (Zamacona to Wyke, in Tamayo 2017, t. 4, v. XXXVII, doc. 6, 21).

Extending their opposition against corporate legal privileges in Mexico, Juárez rejected the notion that a club of great powers had special rights to police the international order. Because the country possessed “liberal institutions, foreigners in Mexico, without a need for the special protection of treaties, are considered with equality to the Mexicans and they enjoyed the rights and guarantees granted by the law” (Juárez, December 8, 1867, Secretaría de la Presidencia 1976, 86). Foreigners and their investments should be placed under Mexican jurisdiction. Emphasizing the point, the Mexican minister in Paris argued that Mexico should require foreign nationals to “expressly renounce their rights as foreigners [*derechos de extranjería*] in all results of the contract” to prevent them from invoking the law of nations (de la Fuente a Zamacona, July 30, 1861 in Tamayo 2017, t. 4, v. XXXVII, doc. 33).

The arguments anticipated the Calvo Clause,<sup>4</sup> with implications beyond Mexico. Non-intervention should become the cornerstone of a liberal, republican international order. According to Zarco, “the principle of non-intervention of one state in the internal affairs of the others is the only guarantee of sovereignty and the Independence of nationalities” (quoted in Castañeda Batres 1961, 95–6). The argument was bolder than those of eighteenth-century European jurists and, indeed Calvo, who accepted the right to intervene in “uncivilized” polities. The *juaristas* knew from experience that European empires would reclass the targets of their interventions as disorderly or semi-barbaric, thereby rationalizing their actions under nineteenth-century international law. Such self-interested interventions, however, were tantamount to piracy and beneath the proper conduct of civilized states.

## Republican Fraternity

The liberals of 1848 emphasized the mutual duties of citizens, placing *fraternité* alongside *liberté* and *égalité* in the republican triptych. Responding to the excesses of 1789, fraternity was meant to act as a safeguard against the unfettered pursuit of radical liberty and equality (Ambroise-Rendu 2011, 115). For many European liberals, fraternal bonds extended beyond borders to the support of republics elsewhere (see Hazareesingh

<sup>4</sup> The clause requires foreigners to settle disputes under domestic law. Despite Calvo's deference to Napoleon III, he criticized the French intervention in the second edition of his *Le droit international théorique et pratique* (1870, 1: 239–53). While there is no evidence of direct correspondence with *juaristas*, Calvo maintained close contact with the Latin American diaspora in Paris, where he resided during the intervention. As Gobat (2013) shows, expatriates played a central role in diffusing ideas about non-intervention and republicanism.

1998, 248–51). The notion of fraternity played a similar role in how *juaristas* envisioned relationships and political responsibilities in a community of republican states. As in Europe, their own understanding of fraternity reflected Christian ethics and was influenced by the homosocial conviviality of the masonic lodge. Juárez himself was a dedicated freemason, inducted in 1847 under the pseudonym William Tell, the Swiss national hero famed for executing an oppressive Habsburg bailiff (Tamayo 2017, t.1 v. III, doc. 31; Thomson 2018).

The *juaristas* invoked fraternity in both domestic and international contexts, often in relation to struggles against the reinstatement of colonial domination. Many liberals throughout the Americas understood themselves as part of the same struggle. From Mexico to Chile, republicans argued for closer diplomatic relations to “establish the fraternity of all the Spanish American race,” already linked by history, culture, and familial ties (Zarco 1856 in Castañeda Batres 1961, 206; also, Santana and Guerra 2006). Adopting a Kantian view, they argued that reciprocal hospitality and cooperation would foster the development of a republican community of states (Mantilla Blanco, 2021; Torres Caicedo 1865, 6).

Starting with Simon Bolívar’s Congress of Panama (1826), Spanish American diplomats portrayed their countries as a society of equals, connected by heritage and a shared political project. Disunity made republics easy targets for empire; the antidote was confederation. In proposing a continental defensive treaty in 1856, republicans from Peru, Chile, and Ecuador emphasized their “ties of fraternity” as “members of the great American family, linked by common interests, common origin, and the similarity of their institutions” (quoted in Torres Caicedo 1865, 241). As Colombia’s José María Samper (1859, 358) emphasized, the purpose of confederation was to advance in international society “the cause of the democratic republic, openly opposed to slavery, to the spirit of intervention and of invasion, to the governments of oligarchies or pretend sovereigns.” Following the London Convention, the Peruvian government dispatched a special mission to demonstrate its support and negotiate Mexico’s adherence to the 1856 pact. The mission demonstrated “continuous proof of sympathy” from the “countries of America, with whom we are united by bonds of fraternity,” Juárez noted. “The triumph of Mexico would serve to ensure the independence and respectability of the sister republics” (Juárez, May 31, 1862, Secretaría de la Presidencia 1976, 80).

The French intervention lent urgency to calls for unity. Peru’s President Ramón Castilla warned that European designs went beyond unpaid debts and could provoke a “war of the crowns against the Liberty caps” (quoted in Frazer 1948, 379). Some Spanish American liberals made stronger claims about republics’ moral obligations to mutual aid, most notably the Chilean radical Francisco Bilbao. His *La América en peligro* [America in danger] (1862) called for collective action, appealing to both “fraternity” and “solidarity” with Mexico. Social clubs in South America denounced the intervention, gathered funds, petitioned governments,

and called for confederation based on “solidarity of interests” to serve as “a true fortress against aggressions and unjust pretensions on the part of the great Powers” (Sociedad de la Unión Americana de Santiago 1867). Usage of “solidarity” and “fraternity” in the Spanish American context often overlapped, although the *juaristas* rarely invoked the neologism “solidarity” when discussing relations with “sister republics.”<sup>5</sup>

Spanish American fraternity lacked the material means to affect the outcome of the war. But it found symbolic expressions, which Mexican liberals appreciated. When Maximilian sent an ambassador to the court at Rio de Janeiro, Spanish American diplomats refused to receive him or even shake his hand (Nuñez Ortega 1970, 12–3). Spanish American governments bestowed honors on Juárez as the *Benemérito de las Américas* [Meritorious of the Americas]. A Colombian senator’s homage reverberated with republican sentiment: “It seems as though Providence, which has created Europe to maintain traditions of monarchism and despotism, also created America for democracy and republican institutions, separating both by an Ocean” (Morales 1971). In Brazil—where the royal family had Habsburg blood—liberals, republicans, and abolitionists cheered the cause of Juárez as a model for their own country (Coelho 2010). In later years, Juárez recalled the friendship of the American republics in sharp contrast to the unanimous recognition of Maximilian’s empire by European governments (Secretaría de la Presidencia 1976, 86).

Republicans throughout the Americas long held the belief that the New World’s political institutions would provide the basis for cooperation. While fraternal bonds came more naturally among Spanish Americans, relations with the United States were often strained. This was especially true in Mexico, which had recently been defeated by its northern neighbor, losing half of its territory to the United States in 1848. Under the influence of Manifest Destiny, the Monroe Doctrine was increasingly invoked in the mid-nineteenth century as a rationale for opening new land for white settlement and, in some cases, the extension of slavery. Early in his presidency, Juárez felt these pressures directly from the James Buchanan administration. Although Mexicans never forgot the bitter experience of war with the United States, many *juaristas* held out hopes that political change in Washington would pave the way both for improved relations and a redefinition of the Monroe Doctrine as a principle of republican international society. While Abraham Lincoln’s election and the U.S. war over slavery rekindled these hopes, the French intervention made mutual aid imperative.

The *juaristas* had suffered the consequences of expanding U.S. power, but also had taken shelter in the United States. Exile fed liberals’ admiration for

<sup>5</sup> *Juaristas* generally used “solidarity” when referring to material interests, especially with regard to the United States (see Zamacona to Romero, July 29, 1861, Tamayo 2017, t. 37, vol. 4, doc. 30). The conceptual boundaries of “fraternity” and “solidarity” remain contested in political theory (Hooker 2009; Sangiovanni and Viehoff 2023).

U.S. institutions, values, and booming commerce, while exposing them to slavery and racism (Hamnett 1994, 52–4; Santana and Guerra 2006). Even before the French intervention, Mexican liberals hoped that the United States would counterbalance European empires' support for their domestic adversaries and serve as a "nucleus" for a genuinely liberal international order (Ocampo to Mata, March 3, 1858, in Tamayo 2017, t. 2, v. X, doc. 56). As partners, Mexico and the United States could "shape the public law of America" to create a propitious environment for republics (Ocampo, draft treaty, June 18, 1859, in Tamayo 2017, t. 3, vol. XXIV, doc. 31). In this light, *juaristas* proposed the redefinition of the Monroe Doctrine, as "a class of permanent principle that impels the obligation of helping one another at all times to reject any European intervention whatsoever in exclusively American affairs" (S. Lerdo de Tejada, quoted in Sierra 1960, 471). Such a partnership would require the United States to look beyond narrow material interests and to "inaugurate a generous and continental policy in America, if they want to give shelter to the other republics and serve the cause of universal liberty" (Matías Acosta a Juárez, May 2, 1859, in Tamayo 2017, t. 2, v. XII, doc. 23).

After the election of Abraham Lincoln in 1860, Mexico's lead diplomat in Washington traveled to meet the president-elect in Springfield, Illinois. After the encounter, Romero reported that Mexico could expect Lincoln's policy to be "truly fraternal and not guided by the egoistical and anti-humanitarian principles with respect to Mexico that have been followed by Democratic administrations" (Romero, Jan. 23, 1861, in Tamayo 2017, t. 4, v. XXX, doc. 3). Lincoln and his minister Thomas Corwin expressed sympathies based in "mutually advantageous principles that rightly united the sister republics" (Corwin, May 31, 1861, in Tamayo 2017, t. 4, v. XXXIV, doc. 16). Concrete support would be limited by the U.S. Civil War, which created a window for the European intervention. Napoleon III and Maximilian challenged the idea of a natural unity among the states of the Western Hemisphere and sought to block the application of the Monroe Doctrine (Maximilian to Napoleon III, 1866, Tamayo 2017, t. 11, v. CLXXIX, doc. 16). Fearing war with France, Secretary of State William Seward cautiously enacted neutrality in the Mexican imbroglio while doubting the viability of monarchism on American soil. From the *juarista* perspective, Washington's waffling in this clash of competing systems was "offensive to American fraternity" (Terán to Juárez, Oct. 12, 1865, t. 10, v. CLV, doc. 20).

As the North gained the upper hand in the Civil War, the drumbeat of the Monroe Doctrine grew louder. In 1864, the U.S. House of Representatives passed a resolution condemning "monarchical government erected on the ruins of any republican government in America, under the auspices of any European power." (New York Times 1864; Shawcross 2021, 140). While European imperialists could be "indifferent to the Monroe doctrine" amidst the U.S. internecine conflict, Juárez and other Spanish American republicans believed that

the victorious North would aid their cause (Juárez to Romero, June 29, 1864, in Tamayo 2017, t. 9, v. CXXI, doc. 2; Frazer 1948, 380–1). In personal correspondence, Juárez frequently invoked the Monroe Doctrine to that effect (Juárez to Santacilia, May 25, 1865, in Tamayo 2017, t. 9, v. CXLV, doc. 13; Juárez to Santacilia, Jan. 12, 1866, in Tamayo 2017, t. 10, v. CLXII, doc. 11). After Lincoln's assassination, *juaristas* expressed sympathies for the Union, pressing Andrew Johnson to put the Monroe Doctrine into practice (Romero, April 24, 1865, in Tamayo 2017, t. 10, v. CXLVI, doc. 2). His hands now free, Seward (1866, 399, 450) warned France that Maximilian's presence was an affront to republican sentiments in the Americas. Seward's references to the Monroe Doctrine were largely unilateral; in contrast, *juaristas* advanced a distinct vision in which the U.S. policy would become a "continental program" that juxtaposed New World democracy with the Old World's "aristocracy and monarchies" (Blas Balcárcel 1867, in Tamayo 2017, t. 12, v. CCXXXV, doc. 6).

This *juarista* aspiration anticipated later Latin American calls for a multilateralization of the Monroe Doctrine (see Scarfi 2016). Over and over again these hopes were dashed by U.S. unilateralism and intervention. Growing U.S. power after the Civil War would reshape inter-American relations—although not in the fraternal direction that the *juaristas* hoped. In the United States, even Juárez's supporters could not shed their pretensions of superiority. U.S. paternalism was an unsurmountable obstacle in the pursuit of fraternal equality in hemispheric relations. Instead, in the wake of the Mexican victory, the now unchallenged United States gave the Monroe Doctrine an increasingly unilateral and imperialistic meaning.

## AN ANTI-IMPERIAL LIBERAL INTERNATIONALISM?

Through their tenacious resistance, Benito Juárez and his liberal supporters outlasted one of Europe's greatest powers and ended Napoleon III's imperial adventure. Following a siege of Querétaro, the constitutional army captured Maximilian and put him to death on June 19, 1867. France's plan to establish an empire in the Americas thus ended with a literal shot to the heart of the European monarch who had dreamed of giving dynasticism a liberal revival.

Thanks to expanding telegraphic networks, the execution was debated across the Atlantic world. Despite divisions over Maximilian's fate, French republicans cheered Napoleon III's struggles in Mexico. The renowned writer Victor Hugo expressed his support for the Mexican cause, even as he appealed personally to Juárez to spare Maximilian as a demonstration of true republican principles and the inviolability of human life (Hugo [1867] 1883, 240). In contrast, Edouard Manet celebrated the emperor's execution in a series of controversial paintings that invited the viewer to join the firing squad (Elderfield 2006, 29, 42–3). Regardless, Juárez's victory energized the liberal republican cause in the aftermath of 1848, weakening Napoleon III, and



hastening the downfall of the monarchy in Spain. The president of the First Spanish Republic, Emilio Castelar, referred to Juárez as “that government which has saved democracy” with its defeat of Napoleon III (Hale 1990, 37). All these contemporaries understood the Mexican victory as an inflection point in their struggles against despotism and empire.

In contrast, this episode and its *juarista* protagonists rarely feature in more recent intellectual histories of liberalism. But the implications were substantial. The debate over Mexico’s civilizational status clarified liberals’ positions on the boundaries of legitimate intervention and direct rule (Eastman 2021; Todd 2021, 66). For “progressive liberals” the debacle demonstrated that colonial rule could not and should not be imposed upon a people who possessed a “nationality” (Middleton 2023). Mexico’s victory showed that its people had reached this threshold, foreclosing European justifications for conquering Spanish American nations. In addition, *juaristas*’ resistance and arguments catalyzed the notion of an anti-imperialist “Latin America” (Gobat 2013). Increasingly, the region’s leaders challenged their exclusion from the Eurocentric international order. Echoing Juárez, Latin American diplomats and jurists argued for strict sovereign equality and limitations on great powers’ prerogatives, prominently at the Second Hague Conference in 1907 (Finnemore and Jurkovich 2014; Schulz 2017). In the wake of the Mexican Revolution (1910), a new generation built on *juarista* precursors to advance more radical visions of international order (Knight 1985; Thornton 2021).

*Juarista* arguments about popular sovereignty, self-determination, and international law prefigured later iterations of liberal internationalism. Nonetheless, *juaristas*’ political thought is strikingly absent from the tradition’s intellectual history, which focuses with few exceptions on its Anglo-American origins. In the United States, especially, the roots of this worldview—arguably the default ideological justification for the global exercise of U.S. power—were long associated with Woodrow Wilson. Cold War proponents credited liberal internationalism with uniting a Western bulwark against totalitarianism; “illiberal” actions, according to this narrative, were written off as deviations from generally progressive impulses. Critics have unearthed the racial, civilizational, and imperial foundations of Anglo-American liberal internationalists (e.g., Mazower 2013; Morefield 2005). However, in doing so, these critiques reiterate the narrow geographic focus of the accounts they seek to challenge (cf. C. A. Bayly 2011; M. Bayly 2023). Liberal internationalism was debated and contested more broadly, and for a longer period, than generally recognized. In the 1860s, the *juaristas* already defied European liberals’ “turn to empire,” while placing themselves as heirs and interpreters of liberal traditions. In the *juaristas*’ conception, Europeans had no monopoly on “civilization,” nor a rightful mission to “tutor” or “regenerate” other nations. Such conduct was incompatible with core liberal values.

Similar ideas to those proposed by *juaristas* in the 1860s would become central themes in later anti-

imperialist “world-making” (Getachew 2019). For example, *juaristas*’ insistence on popular sovereignty as a rejection of European civilizing missions and imperial impositions prefigured calls for self-determination by twentieth-century independence leaders. In contrast to the protagonists of later decolonization, Mexican liberals did not show the same commitment to radical racial equality. Once in power, many understood their reform project as entailing the promotion of civilization and progress within their own society. The *juaristas* were ready to oppose empire, at least in the Americas, but unwilling to fundamentally overturn hierarchical conceptions of order *tout court*. In fact, subsequent Mexican governments, culminating in the three-decades-long reign of Porfirio Díaz, returned to European and U.S. models of modernity (Hale 1990).

The *juaristas*’ rejoinder should be integral to constructing a more pluralist and global understanding of the lineages of liberal internationalism. Building on their critique of great power practices, Mexican liberals advocated what they understood to be an anti-imperial alternative, based on popular sovereignty, equality under the law, non-intervention, and fraternity. Juárez and his supporters had been schooled in liberal and republican thought, and they were proficient in the language and conventions of European diplomacy. They honed their ideas in struggles with Conservative adversaries at home and then projected their reformist project for Mexican society into the international sphere. Finding themselves in the crosshairs of European imperialists, *juaristas* enacted their own interpretation of the liberal script.

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## ETHICAL STANDARDS

The authors affirm this research did not involve human participants.

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