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Texts and the Construction of Popular Perceptions: The Writings of Alexander von Humboldt and Justo Sierra and the Rise and Fall of Mexico’s Legendary Wealth

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Abstract:
Popular perceptions of Mexico’s natural wealth changed dramatically over the course of the national period (1820s to the present). During Mexico’s first half-century of independent existence (1820s-1870s), nationals and foreigners sang praise to Mexico’s immense natural riches, maintaining Mexico was a cornucopia, which the geographical shape of the country vividly demonstrated. From the late 19th- to the mid-twentieth centuries, however, a consensus emerged that Mexico was naturally poor. This stark contrast led one historian to assert that during the early national era Mexicans had an exaggerated sense of their nation’s wealth and at the onset of the 20th century Mexicans had an exaggerated sense of their country’s poverty. What accounted for this dramatic shift in perceptions?

Daniel Cosío Villegas, a leading 20th-century Mexican scholar, provides an answer. He argues that in the early national era, following colonial era precedents, Mexicans exaggerated Mexico’s natural wealth because it benefitted them politically and economically. The late-19th-century downgrading of Mexico’s natural wealth, in contrast, was the result of science and empiricism: Scientists finally accurately measured the extent of Mexico’s natural wealth and concluded Mexico was naturally poor. Today, in many respects, Cosío Villegas’ explanation is the dominant one. There is a scholarly consensus that during the early national era an inflated and erroneous assessment of Mexican natural wealth existed, and that the late-19th-century downgrading was a more accurate assessment. Thus, a scientific measuring project accounted for the rejection of a depiction of Mexico as a treasure chest of riches and its replacement with an antithetical image of Mexico as naturally poor.

This paper disagrees. While it does not attempt to provide a comprehensive explanation, it stresses the importance of ideas rather than empirical scientific research in the narrative of the rise and fall of the notion of “Mexico’s legendary wealth.” This paper shows that two texts played a significant role in the competing assessments of Mexico’s natural riches. Alexander von Humboldt’s independence-era Political Essay on the Kingdom of New Spain (1811) played a vital role in shaping a depiction of Mexico as a treasure chest of natural wealth. Justo Sierra’s late-19th-century essay México social y político (1889) played a pivotal part in the construction of a portrayal of Mexico as naturally poor. The ideas in both these works proved very influential since many writers repeated them, built
upon them, and reformulated them. Thus, influential texts significantly shaped popular perceptions of Mexico’s natural wealth.

**Introduction**

Since the age of conquest, owing to the writings of the early chroniclers, Mexico was depicted as a place of great natural riches. Perhaps this characterization became even more prominent during the late colonial era, for during the 18th century Bourbon Reforms new plans were made to exploit Mexico’s mineral and agricultural wealth. Arguably the heyday of idea of Mexico’s great natural abundance was the age of early nationhood—roughly the first half of the 19th century, when Alexander von Humboldt’s *Political Essay on the Kingdom of New Spain*, which depicted Mexico as naturally rich, appeared. During this era nationals and foreigners advertised the great wealth and immense economic potential of the newly independent nation. Attitudes noticeably shifted at the end of the 19th century. A critique of the idea of Mexico’s legendary wealth emerged, which countered that the nation was naturally poor. Porfirian intellectual Justo Sierra published the most influential critique during this period. This critique became more pronounced during the age of the Mexican Revolution (1910s) and the period of “Reconstruction” (1920s-30s) that followed. By the mid-20th century there was something of a consensus that Mexico was naturally poor. From this new perspective, early-national-era assessments that Mexico was naturally rich were viewed as pure fantasy. Thus, perceptions of the extent of Mexico’s natural wealth changed significantly over time.

This presentation seeks to explain what accounted for this dramatic shift in perceptions and representations of Mexico’s natural riches. It highlights the importance of discourse and language rather than science and empiricism. My argument is in keeping with the observations of a writer who commented on the subject of Mexico’s natural wealth in the 1930s. He maintained that never had there been a subject written about so much but studied so little. In keeping with this observation, my contention is that the changing representations of Mexico’s natural riches were not the consequence of an empirical measuring project (as some contemporaries claimed), but rather the influence of language, specifically influential texts. This presentation focuses on two texts. One is Humboldt’s *Political Essay*, which originally appeared in 1811. The other is Justo Sierra’s 1889 essay, *México Social y Político*. My argument is that these texts played crucial roles in the formation of attitudes about Mexico’s natural wealth. Humboldt’s work, more than anything else, shaped the popular attitude that Mexico was naturally rich. Sierra’s work was equally influential. It was crucial to refuting Humboldt and slowly building the new consensus that Mexico was naturally poor.

What accounted for the great impact of these texts? My argument is that the broader discursive context was crucial. One important point to stress is that the topic of Mexico’s natural wealth was discussed in a wide range of discourses, including those of government, intellectuals, and the press. Since the idea of Mexico’s natural wealth was so prominent in public discourse, a range of groups and individuals found it useful to incorporate a discussion of Mexico’s wealth it into their discourses. How do the two texts come in? During the early national era a range of writers found it useful to build on
Humboldt’s depiction of Mexico as naturally rich. Similarly, after Sierra’s publication, a variety of writers followed him since critiquing the idea of that Mexico was naturally rich proved useful to forwarding their distinct agendas. The discourse changed from one of natural abundance to one of natural dearth, and writers adapted, finding ways to incorporate the divergent depictions into their broader discourses. Thus, my argument is that Humboldt and Sierra both “got the ball rolling” (to use a metaphor). Others simply followed suit. Thus, this paper focuses on the impact of texts, which I deem to be important. This is not to say that there were not other factors. However, they will not be explored since they are beyond the scope of this paper. This paper is organized as follows: after a brief reflection on the extent of a shift in representations of Mexico’s wealth that occurred over time, the paper has a section on Humboldt and his impact, a section on Sierra and his influence, and ends with a brief epilogue.

From wealthy to poor: a shift in representations of Mexico’s natural wealth

Before examining the writings of Humboldt and Sierra, I want to briefly reflect on the extent to which representations of Mexico’s natural wealth changed over time. Contemporaries commented on this issue, particularly critics of the idea that Mexico was naturally rich. Critics maintained that there was a significant difference between themselves and their predecessors, claiming that their predecessors’ assessments had been inflated and erroneous and that their own less optimistic assessments were accurate. But some contemporaries disagreed. For example, when critics blamed foreign military invasions on Humboldt’s depiction of Mexico as a treasure chest of natural riches (which made foreigners crave Mexico’s wealth and invade to steal it) some writers objected. Humboldt’s defenders maintained that the German had pointed out Mexico’s physical deficiencies, and thus his account was accurate. Furthermore, they maintained, it was not Humboldt’s fault if some readers of his work misinterpreted him or failed to read his work carefully.

Despite the fact that Humboldt’s defenders made a valid point (some of his economic critiques of the physical environment were extensive), I think Humboldt’s critics were on target, even if I certainly don’t agree with all their critiques. Let me elaborate. Despite the fact that economic critiques of the natural environment existed during the early national era (the period during which I have maintained Mexico was deemed naturally wealthy), these critiques did not undermine the general premise that Mexico was naturally rich. (For example, after discussing Mexico’s arid northern frontier Humboldt maintained that it was the exception to the rule since Mexico’s soil, by and large, was extremely fertile.) Rather, it simply suggested that impediments that thwarted the exploitation of Mexico’s considerable natural riches needed to be overcome. The late-19th-century critique, in contrast, depicted Mexico as naturally poor. Humans had to overcome natural obstacles to create wealth. So despite the fact that critiques of the physical environment were a commonality, representations of the amount of natural riches that existed in Mexico changed dramatically over time. Illustrating this dramatic shift in representations, by the mid-20th-century some commentators maintained that by then the pendulum had swung too far in the other direction towards impoverishment, and the reality was somewhere between the two extremes of impoverishment and abundance.
This commentary, I think, can be read as a reaction to the emergence of a new consensus that Mexico was naturally poor. Thus, I think I am on solid ground with my assertion that during the early national era a general perception that Mexico was naturally rich existed and that in the post-Revolutionary reconstruction era (1920s-1940s) a consensus that Mexico was naturally poor existed.

**Humboldt’s Political Essay on the Kingdom of New Spain (1811) and its impact**

*Political Essay on the Kingdom of New Spain* was one of numerous works Humboldt published on Latin America after he visited the region from 1799 to 1804. It was arguably Humboldt’s most popular work. The original French version appeared in 1811. Within about a decade or so editions would appear in English, German, and Spanish, and more than one version appeared in some languages. Furthermore, abridged editions also appeared. One scholar’s detailed study shows that of the dozens of works Humboldt published, *Political Essay* was what he was best known for in Europe. In independent Mexico *Political Essay* was required reading, so to speak. It was also popular in the United States and Latin America (even if in the latter other works about South America were probably more prominent).

By focusing on Humboldt’s influence on the idea of Mexico’s great natural abundance I am taking a somewhat narrow approach—one that Humboldt himself probably would have objected to. Indeed, Humboldt’s study was comprehensive and holistic. It covered a wide range of topics and found interconnections between them. Thus, properly speaking, Humboldt’s study was not a work of political economy. Nevertheless, economy was prominently featured in his study. And Humboldt himself explicitly said that he wrote his work with special attention to commercial and economic aspects of Mexico.

As scholar José Enrique Covarrubias has emphasized, Humboldt’s notion of wealth focused on “nature,” or the economic potential afforded by the physical environment. Thus, Humboldt provided a detailed examination of the physical environment from an economic vantage point. His examination was comprehensive. For example, he regularly considered geography, climate, temperature, humidity, topography, location, natural resources, and soil quality. Not only was Humboldt’s study of the natural environment comprehensive, but also encyclopedic—he documented Mexico’s natural wealth in great detail. A testament to this detail is that historians still find the information he compiled useful today (an example would be Kouri’s recent renowned study of the Mexican vanilla industry).

But what made Humboldt’s study arresting was that it articulated a compelling economic vision. It was not just a compilation of data and statistics. Rather, it painted a clear picture of what Mexican economic progress would look like, and it was very optimistic. And it was a broad vision since Mexico’s natural wealth offered a range of development possibilities. Part of Humboldt’s vision focused on trade. A main point that Humboldt stressed was Mexico’s perfect geographical commercial location situated right in the middle of Europe and Asia, a position that destined Mexico to become a leader in
world commerce. Humboldt discussed the possibilities of a canal to link the two oceans at length, discussing eight potential spots. He favored Tehuantepec, even if he acknowledged that more research needed to be carried out before the final spot was determined. For Humboldt, technological advance in the transportation sector coupled with freeing New Spain of Spanish commercial restrictions would turn Mexico into a dominant global commercial power. Agriculture also figured very prominently in his vision. As noted, for Humboldt it was the most significant branch of the economy. Owing to Mexico’s large size, fertile soil (his comparative study showed yields in Mexico were among the world’s highest), and varied climate, he explained, New Spain could produce high yields of almost anything. His discussion of cotton and sugar are cases in point. He noted that Mexico’s production of these important cash crops was limited. But he maintained that things would change. Owing to natural advantages, Mexico was destined to become a world leader in cotton and sugar production. Population increase via colonization was also part of Humboldt’s vision to enhance agriculture. Since Mexico was naturally wealthy but sparsely populated, it needed more hands to exploit its natural wealth. Supporting this vision, Humboldt maintained that Mexico could easily support a ten-fold increase in population. Another part of Humboldt’s vision—and the topic he wrote about in the most depth—was silver mining. For Humboldt, Mexico’s role as the leading silver producer would continue. Further, Mexico could enhance its already dominant position since current production methods were inefficient since the latest and best technology was not utilized. For Humboldt, silver complemented agriculture, for where the former flourished the latter did too. Humboldt’s argument about the positive reciprocal relationship between the two industries countered the “economists’” conventional wisdom, which assumed that a focus on silver took attention away from agriculture and resulted in agrarian decline. A focus on silver, however, had a negative impact on a different branch of the economy: industry. Humboldt saw much promise in Mexican industry but maintained that one of the reasons it was not fully developed was a lack of attention to exploiting industrial metals owing to a focus on precious metals. Spanish policies, which discouraged domestic production, also limited Mexican industry. Hence, for Humboldt, changing priorities and policies would result in the enhancement of Mexican manufacturing.

An important theme in Humboldt’s study—which was hinted at in the previous paragraph—was that obstacles impeded the exploitation of Mexico’s vast natural riches. He discussed a range of obstacles. Some were physical (topography stifled trade), some were political (mercantilism limited trade and production), some were technical (inefficient production techniques), some were demographic (insufficient people to exploit all Mexico’s wealth), and some were socioeconomic (inequality limited consumerism). Humboldt’s discussion of obstacles actually increased the mood of optimism in his text. His futuristic vision emphasized Mexico’s immense potential: after these obstacles were overcome Mexico was destined for grandeur.

In sum, on the most basic level, one can argue that what Humboldt’s work succeeded in doing, above all, was raising Mexico’s global economic profile and significance. This was clearly part of Humboldt’s intent. He explicitly countered influential European writers (such as Robertson) who had disparaged Mexico and the
western hemisphere more broadly. For Humboldt, Mexico had unlimited economic potential and a wide range of economic areas to develop, including the economic sectors of agriculture, precious metals, industry and industrial metals, and trade. Furthermore, some of these economic sectors complemented and reinforced one another so they could be developed together.

Covarrubias has characterized Humboldt’s book as a “work in progress” that writers built upon in a range of ways. This demonstrates the influence of his vision of Mexico as a treasure chest of natural wealth. Nationals and foreigners built upon this Humboldtean vision, thereby popularizing the idea of Mexico’s vast natural abundance. Thus, the popular idea of Mexico’s riches was largely a consequence of building upon—including creative variations and reformulations of—Political Essay.

Why were Mexicans and foreigners so receptive to Humboldt’s idea that Mexico was naturally rich? Answering this question could be the subject of an entire book, but I will only briefly respond here, providing some explanations, but limited discussion. One explanation has to do with timing. During independence and the early national period there was great interest in Mexico but limited information about it. The interest was largely a consequence of independence since Spain’s departure created new opportunities, which made foreigners and nationalists eager for information about Mexico. Owing to Spain’s restrictions there was limited information—Humboldt’s text filled the void.

Antecedents provide another explanation for the popularity of Humboldt’s message. As Covarrubias has written, Humboldt statistically confirmed creoles’ assumptions of national greatness based rooted in Mexico’s considerable natural riches, an idea that became prominent during the era of the 18th century Bourbon reforms. A related point that supports this assertion is the fact that most of Humboldt’s study was based upon colonial era documents, which were generously shared with Humboldt. Thus, to embrace Humboldt’s idea was to confirm long-held assumptions, which probably made people more receptive to his message.

This leads us to arguably the most important factor in explaining Humboldt’s impact: his message. His depiction of Mexico as naturally rich was very appealing both in Mexico and abroad. But it was more than that. Humboldt’s cosmopolitanism and diverse economic vision widened and broadened his appeal. Let me briefly elaborate with four points:

1) Creole nationalists could cite Humboldt and make bold predictions of grandeur for their fledgling nation. In this regard, Humboldt’s critique of Spanish mercantilism was perhaps also appealing. After the “shackles” (as Humboldt termed them) of Spanish policies were removed prosperity could be achieved.

2) Diverse national visions and interests could invoke Humboldt to support their projects. A) Economic liberals who subscribed to comparative advantage could champion free trade and cite Humboldt to support their calls for colonization, canals, and roads, which
would enable Mexico to exploit its rich but unpopulated and unexploited lands and thereby become a leading exporter of “colonial products,” such as sugar and cotton. B) Conversely, mercantilists could cite Humboldt to support their vision of a Mexican silver empire. Furthermore, mercantilists could make broad appeals. Following Humboldt, they could argue that mining enhanced agriculture. C) Industrialists invoked Humboldt to promote a manufacturing ideal, recalling that part of Humboldt’s critique of colonial policy was its focus on silver and neglect of exploiting Mexico’s industrial minerals and potential.

3) Owing to Humboldt’s liberal cosmopolitan vision and appeal, foreigners found it useful to invoke him. Indeed, Humboldt’s liberal cosmopolitanism envisioned foreigners (from a range of countries) working with nationals to develop Mexico’s natural wealth. Numerous European countries and the US were interested, with perhaps the British and Americans topping the list, at least in the early national era. Americans—some enamored with a Jeffersonian “empire of liberty” vision—were interested in agrarian investment opportunities and land acquisition. (An interest that was expressed in Humboldt’s meeting with Jefferson, during which the German shared his maps of Mexico’s north with the American president; this American interest was also evident when Pike stole Humboldt’s maps of Mexico). This Humboldtian joint national-foreign development-project vision appeared to have been realized in Texas, but went awry when Texas declared independence. In the early national period, the British became very involved in Mexican mines and relied on Political Essay to determine where to invest, and also to make their case for foreign involvement.

4) Invoking and repeating Humboldt also provided support for political agendas and imperialism. Here Humboldt’s analysis of “obstacles” came into play. Broadly speaking, by citing obstacles to exploiting Mexico’s wealth commentators could reconcile the idea of vast natural abundance with Mexico’s economic stagnation during the early national era. It was not that the wealth did not exist, but rather the problem lay in exploiting it. Furthermore, this type of analysis proved useful to groups pushing their political agendas. For example, noted Mexican liberals such as Mora and Otero were able to use the Humboldtian idea of vast abundance in their attack on social hierarchy and corporatism: only be creating a liberal horizontal society of citizens and privatizing corporate (Church) wealth could Mexico exploit its natural riches and prosper. Some foreigners made similar arguments to promote their agendas, even if the specifics were different. For example, French ideologues (during the French intervention of the 1860s) justified imperialism on the grounds that Mexicans were not up to the task of exploiting their considerable natural wealth. The implication was clear: France needed to take over in order to fulfill the Humboldtian vision of Mexican grandeur.

Justo Sierra’s México social y político (1889) and its impact

While there were earlier isolated (and brief) critiques of the idea that Mexico was naturally rich, the first in-depth critique of the idea appeared in Justo Sierra’s 1889 lengthy essay titled México social y político. It is important to note that Sierra utilized the ideas of his predecessors. For example, much of his economic critique of Mexico’s
coastal regions followed Humboldt. But there was an important difference. Sierra’s main argument was distinct. His argument was that his predecessors had overestimated the degree of Mexico’s natural riches. Mexico was not naturally rich, as they had maintained, but rather naturally poor.

Rather than a comprehensive elaboration of Sierra’s critique, I will highlight aspects of it that proved influential in the sense that contemporaries and later generations repeated them. First and foremost: his contention that his predecessors (especially but not only Humboldt) exaggerated the extent of Mexico’s natural riches. Second, Sierra’s desire to correct this inaccuracy, which had created an erroneous “legend” or “myth” of natural riches, by countering it with an accurate assessment: namely, Mexico was naturally poor. As this downgrading reveals, Sierra and later writers were positivists in the sense that they believed the amount of wealth that existed in Mexico could be empirically measured. Their job was to set the record straight. Third, Sierra’s explanation for why Mexicans previously had been ignorant to their natural poverty: blind nationalism (Later writers would repeat Sierra’s explanations for why this “myth of wealth” persisted and sometimes add new ones.) Fourth, a discussion of the negative consequences of subscribing to the erroneous legend: Mexico’s historical failures. Indeed, much of Sierra’s writing focused on the negative historical consequences that subscribing to the erroneous legend had on Mexican historical development. For Sierra, part of the explanation for Mexico’s woes during the early national era—economic stagnation, civil wars, and foreign invasions—stemmed from Mexicans’ and foreigners’ adherence to the erroneous legend of wealth. This last point suggests the political and ideological implications of the critique. Sierra utilized it to draw contrasts between his position and his predecessors. Only with an accurate assessment of Mexico’s natural wealth could Mexico move forward—for correct policies could be fashioned only after Mexico’s natural wealth was correctly understood and measured.

Sierra’s critique caught on during the Porfiriato (1876-1910), even if it never became widespread at that time. His critique of Humboldt and more dim assessment was most notable in the 3-volume work he directed, México: su evolución social (1900-1902). A critique of Humboldt and the erroneous and exaggerated idea of Mexico’s legendary wealth were articulated in several of the chapters, including Sierra’s. Furthermore, one co-author cited and quoted Sierra when critiquing the legend. For the sake of brevity let me just highlight one aspect of the critique articulated in México: su evolución social. In keeping with Sierra’s writings, there was a strong historical component to the 3-volume work. Mexico’s early-national-era failings were largely a consequence of leaders’ adherence to the erroneous legend of wealth. Conversely, the successes of the Porfirian era (and they were considerable, according to Sierra and his co-authors) could be attributed to rejecting the false legend and working from an assumption that Mexico was naturally poor. Thus, Sierra and his coauthors wielded their historical critique to separate themselves from their predecessors and to validate the Porfirian regime (which they were leading ideologues in). It is also worth noting that the critique stressed the power of perceptions. False perceptions of their predecessors caused catastrophes and their own correct ones brought success.
Sierra died in 1912, but his critique was popularized during the Mexican Revolution, which lasted the entire decade of the 1910s. It was popularized because it became a controversial issue in debates about revolutionary reform. Thus, politics rather than science and empiricism inspired this discussion and debate. Porfiristas, who sought to roll back and minimize revolutionary agrarianism and nationalism, critiqued the erroneous legend of wealth at greater length than ever before. One Porfirian critic dedicated an entire lengthy book (about 500 pages) to critiquing the legend of wealth, and quoted Sierra’s 1889 essay at length to bolster his argument. Porfirian critics applied their historical critique of the early national era to contemporary politics. They charged that Revolutionists followed in the footsteps of Humboldt and his followers since Revolutionists, too, adhered to the Humboldtean legend of wealth. Porfirian critics argued that adhering to the erroneous legend of wealth led Revolutionists to the wrong conclusions about policies. Porfirian critics defined revolutionists’ position this way: Mexican poverty was rooted not in a lack of wealth, but in an inequitable distribution of Mexico’s considerable riches, for foreign investors and large Mexican landowners took the lion’s share. The solution: Land redistribution and economic nationalism. Porfirian critics countered that poverty was a consequence of Mexico’s impoverished natural environment and consequently reform and nationalism would only make things worse. Some Revolutionists responded to these criticisms, countering that they were not guilty as charged. Whatever the case may be, the insertion of the theme of Mexico’s natural wealth into the debate about revolutionary reform popularized Sierra’s critique of Mexico’s legendary wealth.

While the influence of the Porfirian critics of the Mexican Revolution waned in the post-revolutionary “reconstruction” era of the 1920s and beyond, Sierra’s critique lived on. Very influential post-revolutionary intellectuals embraced and articulated Sierra’s critique. Daniel Cosío Villegas, more than anyone else, popularized the critique, for he published on the subject for several decades starting in the 1920s. He explicitly acknowledged his debt to Sierra. Interestingly, Cosío Villegas argument echoed Sierra’s in numerous ways, revealing continuity between the Porfiran period and Post Revolutionary era. Cosío Villegas engaged in a positivist measuring project that resembled Sierra’s and came to the same conclusion: the Humboldtean legend was inflated and therefore erroneous, and a true measure of Mexico’s natural wealth revealed a much more modest assessment. Like Sierra, Cosío Villegas maintained that nationalism blinded Mexicans from seeing the truth. Also following Sierra, he maintained some of Mexico’s historical problems stemmed from an adherence to the erroneous legend. Finally, Cosío Villegas’ lessons learned sounded a lot like Sierra’s. Mexicans, Cosío Villegas explained, needed to lower their expectations since their nation would never become rich. Further following Sierra, he maintained that the order of the day was hard work, for only via human effort could wealth be created owing to Mexico’s unforgiving natural environment.

Other post-revolutionary intellectuals also embraced Sierra’s critique in the 1920s, thereby ensuring that it would live on. Cultural nationalists such as Vasconcelos and Silva Herzog incorporated a critique of Mexico’s natural environment into their nationalist cultural discourses. By depicting Mexico as physically poor they were able to
bolster their argument that Mexicans were not inferior. Mexico’s limited material progress was not Mexicans’ fault. This position flipped the early national era immigration discourse, which had argued that an inferior and small population accounted for Mexico’s limited progress and that European immigration would bring prosperity. While not identical to Sierra’s claims, these cultural nationalists did follow him in some ways since he had argued that Mexico would never sustain a large population owing to the unforgiving natural environment. For both Sierra and later cultural nationalists, the natural environment hindered material progress. In fact, Herzog cited Sierra to make his case that the Mexican people were not to blame for their country’s economic woes.

In the 1930s and 1940s socialists and environmentalists gravitated to Sierra’s critique for their own distinct ends. During the agrarian reforms of the 1930s there was a debate over which direction reform should take: collective farms or individual plots. Socialist agronomists invoked a critique of Mexico’s legendary wealth to promote large collective farms. They argued that owing to Mexico’s natural deficiencies the only way to make agricultural economically viable was economies of scale in the form of collective farms, which were more efficient. Socialists actually invoked large-scale colonial-era haciendas as an antecedent that justified their position. Large plots, then and now, were the best option. Similarly, the emerging conservationist/environmentalist movement utilized a critique to promote their goals. Following Sierra (though not citing him), conservationists claimed that subscribing to the erroneous legend of wealth had negative consequences. In the realm of conservation, it caused a disregard for environmental concerns. Since Mexicans believed their natural resources were limitless, conservationists maintained, there was no interest in protecting the natural environment. To promote their cause of conservation, environmentalists depicted Mexico as naturally poor and as a land of limited natural wealth, thereby making the case for conservation.

Epilogue

Over the course of about a century there was a dramatic shift in representations of Mexico’s natural wealth. During the early national era, owing partly to the popularity and wide appeal of a Humboldtean vision of grandeur rooted in natural abundance, there was a consensus that Mexico was naturally rich. However, in the late 19th century, Sierra critiqued this vision and countered that Mexico was naturally poor. Like the Humboldtean vision, a range of groups and interests incorporated Sierra’s critique into their discourses, and thereby popularized the notion that Mexico was poor. By the 1940s there was a consensus that Mexico was disfavored by nature from an economic perspective. By this time, by and large, the theme of Mexico’s natural wealth, which had been a prominent and controversial topic for over a century, seemed to fade into the background.

Nevertheless, the discussion was not entirely over. While perhaps not as prominent as in the past, a small controversy nevertheless ignited in the 1950s. By this time the Revolutionary state had shifted gears. Rather than promote egalitarianism and agrarian reform, the new rage was industrialization. Frank Tannenbaum, the foreigner who had embraced Mexico’s agrarian revolution, articulated an extended critique of
Mexico’s industrial resources in an effort to convince Mexico to abandon industrialism. Mexico didn’t have the proper natural resources to industrialize, Tannenbaum forcefully argued. Tannenbaum’s critique did not sit well with a new vision of Mexican grandeur rooted in industrialism. Ideologues of the Mexican miracle and industrialism attacked Tannenbaum in the press. One of their critiques (there were several) was that Tannenbaum wanted to restrict Mexico to agriculture because he was an imperialist who sought to make Mexico dependent on foreign goods. The only defender Tannenbaum had was Cosío Villegas, the post-revolutionary thinker who did the most to popularize Sierra’s critique. In this new era of optimism and grandeur his was a lone voice that was drowned out. Apparently, a critique of Mexico’s natural wealth and a representation of Mexico as naturally poor no longer fit with the dominant ideology of the post-revolutionary regime.