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The Evolution of Political Practices in Mexican Alta California and the Rise of the *Diputados*

HISTORIANS HAVE often portrayed the political history of Mexican California as a kind of comic opera, featuring a cast of venal Californios and Mexican-appointed officials engaged in sporadic battles over land and the control of Indian labor. But this interpretation takes for granted the existence of “Californios” without probing the origin of that social category, and it fails to consider the roiling changes in Spanish political culture that emerged during the period 1808–1821. Most significantly, historians have consistently underestimated the critical role played by the *diputación* and the *diputados* in the revolutions of the era.

The *diputación*—a committee of seven men indirectly elected biannually—was an outgrowth of the small councils emerging in the provinces of Spain after the French invasion of 1808, and it was institutionalized by the constitutional assembly of 1812 in Cadiz. Historian Nettie Lee Benson has argued that though the *diputación* was relatively weak in Europe, Spaniards in Mexico used it to great avail. My own research bears out Benson’s findings, in the new context of the Mexican republic, but also, my local and bottom-up approach illuminates how the use of the *diputación* in the provinces was negotiated on the ground. Moreover, I pick up the story where Benson left it, when in the 1820s *diputaciones* in other provinces gave way to legislatures but California had a *diputación* for the first time. In fact, it was the organization of a *diputación* in 1822 in California that facilitated Mexicans’ grasp of political power, including supervision of the missions (one of the official attributions of the *diputación* in America) and some control over their lands. A close reading of primary documents at the Bancroft Library at UC Berkeley,

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including minutes of the meetings of the *diputación*, political manifestos, and private correspondence, demonstrate that Californios increasingly regarded the *diputación* as a reflection of the will of the people.

As early as 1823, Governor Argüello used the *diputación* to assert his power against the will of the missionaries. In a letter he sent to the president of the Franciscans in California, he ordered the move of a mission, not because it had already been decided by the missionaries' hierarchy, but because the *diputación* approved it. He adds: "the political authority may not be mocked."¹ In 1829, a rival of the governor, heading a mutiny in Monterey, wrote a manifesto where he emphasized the rights of the people to be represented by a *diputación* (although one was already meeting) and asked for the resignation of the governor, his temporary replacement to be appointed by the *diputación*.² At the same time, the governor convened a meeting of the *diputación* which confirmed its support of him. In 1832, after a revolution led by the former governor against the new one, the *diputación* reiterated its claim to be the body responsible for appointing a new temporary governor.³

The rise of the *diputación* and the *diputados* was hence the consequence of various causes: the will of the Mexican government to promote a civil elite that would be more loyal than the missionaries to the new state, the rivalry between Mexican civil servants who needed local support, the proselytism of radical politicians who wanted to enroll Californians in their reform plans for Mexico and finally the ambition of the young Californians. It was in the name of the *diputación* that Alvarado declared the independence of California in 1836. His official claim was federalism, a translation of the Californians' desire to have equal rights and achieve self-rule into a national context. The opponents of the revolutions did not oppose this vision of the *diputación*, but the legality of its actions. Lacking a constitution to sort out political disputes unequivocally, political rivals resorted to popular mobilization for bloodless military campaigns, a means of supplying a visible expression of the "will of the people" that the elections to the *diputación* seemed to fail to achieve. Oftentimes, this tactic did not work either, and each party ruled a half of the Territory until an external arbitrator—a new governor or an emissary from Mexico—would give legitimacy to a ruler. Consequently, the most stable periods of Mexican California were the times when a governor, legitimated by Mexico, ruled with the *diputación*.

In a nutshell, politics in Mexican Alta California can be best understood by realizing that the region faced the same crisis of legitimacy as the rest of the former Spanish Empire in the same period. The case of Alta California confirms the role of the *diputaciones* in shaping political practices in Spanish America, albeit with some lag, and illustrates the problem of political representation after Independence. It also sheds new light on political affiliations in Mexico, in particular the adoption of federalism in the Provinces.

NOTES

1. Governor Luis Argüello to Mariano Payeras, president of the missions, 17 September 1823, Monterey, Bancroft Library, Departmental Records, I, C-A 46, p. 43.
2. Manifesto of the Solis revolt, signed by Joaquín Solís, Mariano Peguero, Andrés de León, Petronilo Ríos, José de la Torre; probable author: José-María de Herrera, *comisario subalterno* (finance official), 15 November 1829, Monterey. Source: Bancroft Library, Departmental State Papers, Benicia, Military, C-A 19 pp. 153–4, vol. 70, pp. 27–28.
3. Minutes of the *diputación*, 11 January 1832, Los Angeles. Source: Bancroft Library, Legislative records, I, C-A 59, pp. 184–185.