Thanks to Federico Finchelstein and the Janey Program for their invitation to present my work in this room at the New School.

I will present the results of my work on 19th century Mexico in the context of the recent historiography on politics in Latin America after independence. In other words, I will try to combine some broad arguments about the problems and possibilities faced by historians of politics and ideologies in the region with specific results of my research on the legislation and judicial practices about libel in Mexico City.

Politics in nineteenth century Latin America used to be one of the least favorite themes for historians. After independence, politics was a territory of civil war, frustrated nation building, foreign invasions, and a rather shameful anarchy. In Mexico, at least, the joke was that only the history of the 1910 revolution was possible because a) nothing was know about what happened before conquest, b) nothing happened during the colonial period, and c) it was better not to know what had happened during the nineteenth century.
Until recently, caudillos and insurrection made the public space seem a battlefield rather than a meeting point for rational actors. With the growth of social history since the 1970s, the study of peasant rebellions and more recently the emergence of post colonial social identities attracted research that for the most part avoided the traditional areas of politics. A widely accepted assumption was that class, ethnicity and notions of honor strictly bound by sexual difference precluded meaningful engagement between political actors other than alliances. Patronage and charisma were key analytical categories. At least until the last decades of the nineteenth century, when reintegration into transatlantic commodities markets reactivated export economies and allowed for the consolidation of strong regimes.

In the 1990s, studies by Francois-Xavier Guerra and other historians mostly based in Latin America and France, inspired by Furet and through him Tocqueville recovered politics as an object of study through a careful examination of the continuities and breaks between the anciene regime and transatlantic enlightenment. These studies and others coming from the US and closer to the traditional intellectual history practiced in English historiography began to reconstruct the history of concepts that until then had been considered stable references such as pueblo, sovereignty, citizenship. The result was a problematization of liberalism and
republicanism, and a study of political concepts linked to elite sociabilities and a more sensitive ear for transnational dialogues.

In this context the public sphere became a more common category of analysis but one used with certain reluctance. For Guerra and others working around him, the public sphere was mostly a mere physical space for elite sociability. Other historians concerned about the notion of hegemony in a Gramscian tradition, stressed the fragmented nature of Latin American public spheres and the gender and ethnic exclusions that had not been satisfactorily addressed in Habermas’s book.

I propose that if we put the questions related to the history of the public sphere in dialogue with these historians and with the critical cultural narratives of Latin America modeled by Angel Rama in *The Lettered City* we can find productive avenues to make sense of the successes and failures of liberalism. A public culture centered on the role of the *letrado* appeared in cities that were product of both extractive colonization and renaissance rationalism. Urban design created spaces where personal representation was the measure of virtue. Living in town was essential to access communal lands but also for political agency: being a known and respectable neighbor meant face-to-face contact, the sharing of spaces and conversations in a culture where the border between oral and written communication were be fluid.
After independence, the diverse capacity of national capitals to extend notions and practices of citizenship and the idea of the nation throughout their territories offers a more productive way to compare the political trajectories of the new nations. It is not merely the trickling down of modernity from elites to popular culture proposed by Guerra but a richer process in which voices with different degrees of authority engaged in the imagining and construction of new political entities. Studies like those of Jorge Myers and Ariel de la Fuente show that even caudillos, usually characterized by their violent and charismatic style and rural bases of support, were also concerned about channelling public speech and preserving republican institutions. Carmen McEvoy, Elías Palti and Erika Pani, among others, show us how to read the multiple codes contained by the press, not just as a direct expression of partisanship or ideology but as a complex mix of practices, social networks, and alternative versions of sovereignty.

In Mexico, the national historical perspective on politics in the nineteenth century was long dominated by questions intended to explain the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz, 1876-1911, and the social revolution that followed it. During the 1950s, Daniel Cosío Villegas in his *Historia Moderna de México* described the liberal republic, between the defeat of the French invasion and monarchist experiment in 1867 and the consolidation of Díaz’s
power in the 1880s, as a golden age of democracy. Cosío Villegas’s account, intended to offer a critical contrast with the authoritarian postrevolutionary regime, stressed the leadership of intellectuals and journalists as men of democracy. He read public life as the dialectic between the authoritarian instincts capitalized by Porfirio Díaz and the democratic impulses of an educated minority. The historiography that he inspired and fostered through the Colegio de México centered on the careers of a few men, their fight against the centrifugal forces of region and ideology, and the expansion of the state under presidents Benito Juárez and Porfirio Díaz.

There are several shortcomings to this interpretation. One is that it isolates political from social processes. A specific dimension of the process of republican restoration in the 1870s that has attracted little attention is the cultural construction of the liberal elite’s claim to embody the virtues of the nation and to speak in its name. This is an important question that cannot be answered only in terms of patronage networks or democratic idealism, but requires a close look at individual dispositions and the personal accumulation of social capital in the context of changing institutions.

In *The Tyranny of Opinion* I propose that honor was the key to construct a modern public sphere in Mexico. In their writings and their own lives they formulated a theory of honor which defined the rules that authorized them to speak in the name of the rest of society. As civil war ceased to be the main mechanism to solve political disputes, Mexican public
men sought to build their collective and individual authority as a continuation of the sacrifices made by their predecessors during the struggles against conservatives and foreign invaders. The conditions for this construction were not favorable: the state was bankrupt, agriculture and mining decimated, and foreign creditors were reluctant to come back. The country was still fragmented, with regional caciques and military caudillos constantly challenging the authority of the federal government, and competing claims of ethnicity and religion still undermining Mexican citizenship. In order to tackle both economic and institutional reconstruction, the political elite fashioned itself as a group of *hombres de palabra*—men who kept their word and answered to the obligations of honor.

These *hombres de palabra* imagined themselves as courageous representatives of public opinion who could speak about all matters of common interest. They conceived of *publicidad* as a level field of reason and mutual respect. It was a space dominated by men, but one that needed to be constantly revalidated by masculinity. Those who lacked the military credentials of the older generation, for example, tried to build their reputation through other means. Young lawyer Justo Sierra rushed to the opportunity to help quell a small military rebellion in Mexico City in 1871. As he passed by, rifle on the shoulder, he stopped to explain to a friend that he was seeking, in reality, to “take lessons on epic vertigo.”
But opportunities to show martial courage were no longer readily available. Lawyers, writers, administrators, soldiers, and congressmen tried to replace social and political turbulence with republican customs. The end of intra-elite violence was not the same as peace and unanimity, however. Conspiracies and local insurrections continued, while political debates in the press and congress reached unprecedented levels of virulence. These years (1860s to 1880s) saw an expansion of the public realm and a politicization of everyday life, and gave a central role for the “political country”—the small but growing number of educated men who had political clout, represented public opinion, and were willing to expose their reputation to criticism. These men construed their political authority both as a public and personal enterprise.

The republican notion honor embraced by politicians, journalists, poets and other educated men was defined by the correspondence between intimate self esteem and public reputation, and by being equally accessible to all citizens. Honor had been a central concern during the colonial period, although then it was mostly defined as inherited status and purity of blood. (As we know now thanks to the work of professor Ann Twinam among others, it was also disputed and negotiated in courts.) Republican honor, by contrast, centered on the harmony of citizens’ conscience with public opinion. In a pamphlet published in Mazatlán in 1868, Francisco de P. Vega
defended himself against an accusation published in a local newspaper. His words portray very well the dual meaning and the high value of republican honor for Mexican men:

There is nothing more sacred or of greater value in the eyes of cultivated and educated men than honor. Thus, in all times and in all countries we see the sacrifice not only of . . . material goods, but even of life itself; thus we see how, in order to preserve a pure name without stains, individuals, families, cities, nations, and the whole of humanity sacrifice themselves . . . because the conscience of good behavior produces the most intimate and pure joy in our heart, and contributes most directly to a real and truthful peace of the spirit. . . . I defend the only inheritance that I seek for my children: a good name, the never contradicted example of an accredited behavior; I defend, finally, the only moral capital I own, the most valuable jewel in my fortune.

Honor has an internal value ("the most intimate and pure joy") and an external value ("an accredited behavior"). Losing it could have a great cost. Men like de Paula protected their honor because of its symbolic and economic value as social capital.

Vega had reasons to be concerned about Mexican journalists in particular because the material conditions of their trade made them aggressive in matters of honor; they could challenge governments but could
also act as mercenaries paid to build or destroy individual reputations. Press polemics, including debates about policy and elections, could lead to personal confrontations that generated violence.

Journalism illustrates the relationship between the symbolic and material value of honor. Newspapers seldom rose above penury, their printings were small, and none lived off advertising. Most of them needed subsidies to stay afloat. Money was broadly dispersed: politicians at different levels and from different places funded newspapers, with the result that diversity characterized the business. There were 48 newspapers in Mexico City in 1878. Most of them lasted few years, appearing around the time of elections. There were many others in other cities.

Journalists had strong incentives to produce opinions and invent debates. Opinions could be obtained out of little or no information; they were often reproduced from other newspapers. Newsrooms in this period are described as places where scissors and glue were as important as pen and ink, and walls were covered with clippings. The tone of much of the nineteenth century press is self referential. The value of an opinion was the personality behind it so journalists wrote much about each other. They were eager to engage in polemics, sometimes inventing them. Writing in two newspapers and with two different pseudonyms, according to a novel by Emilio Rabasa, one journalist accused himself and responded in terms that were increasingly tense and fascinated readers and boosted sales.
“Combat journalism,” as it was called at the time, remained productive because it attracted readers and subsidies and provided journalists with a path of upward mobility. The profession was not an avenue to wealth but a way, for young writers like Justo Sierra or Federico Gamboa, to acquire social capital that could be used in a later stage of their careers, in their case in the federal government. Even established editors like Vicente García Torres and Ireneo Paz failed to translate their decades of work into a good living. Some, like Filomeno Mata, could not avoid prison and constant economic troubles. Writers like Heriberto Frías dreamed of acquiring a powerful reputation that would advance their status. Sierra, Gamboa and Frías wrote about their own careers as journalists as an essential part of their trajectories as writers and public men.

Although they usually received money to favor the career of one politician by hurting the reputation of his rival, journalists did not see his interested involvement in political disputes as a lack of honesty: in an 1879 article, Justo Sierra proudly stated that “even if they prove that we wrote in a newspaper supported by government resources, they would never be able to prove that we have departed a single line from the imperatives of our beliefs.” Sierra and his readers did not see a contradiction because the premise was that, among honorable men, internal beliefs and external behavior were the same. It would have been an insult to doubt the sincerity
behind each line signed by Sierra, even though his newspaper was receiving money from Porfirio Díaz.

Journalists in Mexico had to be ready to fight a duel against their alleged victims but also against colleagues. Fatal duels were exceptional. Most encounters in the field of honor ended after the first try (usually employing pistols) with rivals and their seconds finding a new friendship and sharing a banquet in a restaurant. They celebrated not only that they came out in one piece, but also the fact that both rivals had demonstrated that they were men of honor and could continue writing aggressively. In 1884, La Libertad mocked the trivial disputes that threatened violence: “Today we journalists are used to the system of bloodless little duels . . . . We insult someone, appoint seconds, they decide that combat is not necessary, ‘and honor is satisfied!’”

There were risks, of course. In April 1880, a polemic about the merits of two presidential candidates lead to accusations against the integrity of authors and editors which included words like “pamphleteer,” “pedantic,” “villain,” disloyal, and coward. From the window of La Libertad Santiago Sierra, Justo’s brother, invited Ireneo Paz, owner of La Patria, to cross Santa Inés street to prove his manhood. A duel took place two days later and Santiago Sierra died. Devastated, Justo Sierra abandoned combat journalism. Ireneo Paz, however, was not punished, even though the duel was prohibited by the Penal Code.
Dueling was losing its legitimacy by the 1890s. In a scandalous case that involved both politics and romance, in 1894, colonel Francisco Romero killed José Verástegui, a high ranking official in Díaz’s administration. After a widely publicized process that involved the Chamber of Deputies and the courtroom, Romero was sentenced to four years of prison, and to pay a fine and a stipend to Verástegui’s wife. A few months later, however, Díaz amnestied Romero. But the sentence, and the negative coverage of the press, signaled changing perceptions about the use of violence to solve disputes between members of the elite.

The juridical institutions established to deal with journalism illustrate the local cultural dimensions of a political history centered on the public sphere. Press legislation illustrates a paradox of Mexican liberalism: while freedom, particularly freedom of the press, was the clearest sign of the new nation’s break with a colonial past of intolerance and absolutism, republican institutions had to limit that freedom in order to protect the rights of citizens. In the words of liberal ideologue José María Luis Mora: “A true public opinion” expressed the unity of reason, and was the only force that could stop dictatorship; the problem was that reason resided in individuals, and public debates could become personal. “Insults,” wrote Mora, “deserve the severest punishment,” because libel invades “the secret asylum of private life.”
Liberal and conservative, federal, centralist and monarchical governments legislated about the press throughout the nineteenth century. Press regulations established the responsibility of editors, writers, and even street sellers. Yet the limits to speech were not defined ideologically, and I found little evidence of actual persecution against immoral publications. In increasingly comprehensive terms, legislators focused on journalists’ offenses against private life and reputation.

Even through the periods of worst instability and foreign war, Mexican governments worried about libel. In the middle of the war against the United States, for example, a law reestablished the press jury, that had been abolished by conservatives. Yet, days after American troops left Mexico City in 1848, the government of José Joaquín Herrera reformed the law to place press offenses under the jurisdiction of criminal judges, and to expand the definition of attacks against honor to include the use of nicknames. In 1857, the press jury became a constitutional right but there was little room to regulate it, in the middle of the Three-Year War between conservatives and liberals. In 1861, as a French fleet set out to invade the country, Juárez decreed a very liberal law that included a jury and then, a few months later, suspended it—as if freedom of the press was a central battleground in the defense of national sovereignty. (The circumstances here are interesting: a newspaper denounced the impertinent behavior of the French charge d’affairs at a party. Fearing this would make precipitate the invasion, the
federal government accused the editors in front of a jury but the citizens of
the jury acquitted the editors.) Even emperor Maximilian, brought by the
French, issued two press codes in 1865 and 1867. One year later, after the
final triumph of the republic, Congress passed the law decreed by Juárez,
which remained in force until 1882.

The most contentious aspect of these laws was the institution of the
press jury. Even if intended to enforce limits to press abuses, juries
constituted the best protection for journalists against the government. In the
views of contemporaries, the role of the institution was not only to protect
freedom of speech but also to provide a place to decide over reputations that
had been attacked in front of the public. As a result, honor was the most
important category in the operation of the juries.

The history of the press jury is contained in five leather-bound
volumes stored in the Mexico City municipal archives. The volumes preserve
most of the nineteenth-century press legislation and 43 complete cases—to
which we can add a few more from other cities preserved in the Supreme
Court archives, newspapers and pamphlets. The cases brought against the
press usually included a copy of the publication deemed libelous, the
complaint by the victim, the deliberations of jurors and their sentence. The
press jury was established shortly after independence in 1821, abolished an
reinstated multiple times, and reached its greater strength and stability from
1868 to 1882. (Judges, not popular juries, decided over most criminal cases
during the same period.) Press juries decided over writings published in the same city they resided accused of attacking morality, political order or private life. Their decisions could not be reviewed and were executed by judicial authorities.

Citizens who felt offended by a publication presented their complaint to the City Council, which ordered the police to seize copies of the newspaper in question and, if the publication was considered subversive, to arrest the author. At the same time, the Council summoned a first jury which decided over the facts of the complaint—whether there had been obscenity, an attack against reputation or an invitation to rebellion. If this jury found that an offense against honor had been committed the process was turned to a judge who attempted a conciliation between victim and accused. Sometimes these negotiations resulted in a public statement signed by both parties where the issue was clarified and everyone stated their satisfaction. If conciliation failed the case returned to the city council, which convoked a second sentencing jury. After a punishment was determined, the city council sent the file to a criminal judge for execution. Sentences could include fines, up to twelve months of prison, and exile from the state.

During its last fourteen years, until 1882, the press jury functioned without interruption and made possible a period of unprecedented openness in the press. As in other countries, particularly France, press juries tended to
protect journalists against governments. In Mexico, only in a quarter of the
trials the jury decided that there was enough evidence to proceed against a
writer. In all these cases the complaint involved a private citizen’s reputation
rather than subversive writings.

Complaints to the press jury could come from theater entrepreneurs
who thought reviewers were unfair, beer producers who argued that a
comment was hurting their interest, women accused by neighbors of abusing
their children. In most cases, however, we find public men complaining
about newspaper articles that attacked their personal reputation, their
integrity as government officials or candidates, but also as private
individuals. Even though there might be a partisan subtext to most of these
accusations, victims chose not to denounce those writings as subversive
because they knew that the jury almost automatically found in favor of
opposition journalists and against the government. Victims knew that honor
was more likely to elicit jurors’ sympathy and result in a decision against a
journalist. This happened when a newspaper denounced that a public official
had supported Maximilian and the French invaders (that he was, in other
words, a traitor) or that he had improperly used public resources.

The operation of the press jury reflected the need to regulate
discussion about honor in public life identified by Mora. Perceived offenses
had to be addressed immediately lest silence be constructed as acceptance
of slander. Press juries met and decided quickly by the standards of the
Mexican legal system. In the cases fully recorded, jurors decided in an average of four days after the complaint, and issued a sentence usually no more than a week later. This is particularly remarkable since the first and second juries had to be composed of entirely different members, eleven men in the first and nineteen in the second. This speed is also impressive if we consider that the absence of jury members or suspects or victims, who sometimes lived in other cities, could cause delays. Thus, even when press jury debates could be unpleasant and attract a large audience, victims chose the jury over civil or criminal court because a regular criminal trial could drag the victim’s honor in public for months.

Reputation and public reputation were central themes during deliberations in front of juries. Press jury trials were often spectacles where audiences played an active role, expressing their opinions about actors and reinforcing the role of juries as representatives of local public opinion about the character of suspect and accused. Public audiences became venues for discussion about the identity of writers who used synonyms or failed to signed articles. Editors, who were legally responsible for the contents of newspapers, refused to provide the names of the true authors of accused writings, even a the cost of suffering prison themselves. In other cases, authors and editors hired vagrants to sign articles.

Although all citizens had honor, the seriousness of a crime could only be assessed if the names of victim and offender were known. Jury members
were expected to be acquainted with the parties in conflict. This personal knowledge was a central reason to justify the press jury as a way to control the press in a republican framework. Attacks against honor could not be defined in absolute terms but were always relative to the standing of victim and suspect in front of public opinion. Hence, only neighbors could assess the reputation that was at risk because they knew whether the victim was a person who had indeed a name to be affected by insult, or, as we would put it today, he or she had social capital to be lost. Similarly, only neighbors could realize whether the author of the attack was also a man of honor. If that was not the case, the insult did not require a reparation.

Press juries responded to the rules of honor because of their ability to understand the subtleties of offensive language. Deputy Guillermo Prieto, a journalist himself and author of the 1861 law, argued for the press jury because only neighbors of a city could interpret written texts and identify attacks against reputation where the legalistic mind of a judge could find no fault. Only intelligent citizens, according to Prieto, could read with the required subtlety and “know if there is injury in the use of italics, suspension points, interrogation marks after a compliment, and to find out whether these devises are used to attribute a vice or a crime to an individual.” We find one example of the subtlety of this reading in the 1861 complaint lodged by Gabor Napheggi against the following two sentences, published in *El Amigo del Pueblo*:
Mr. Napheggi is the individual appointed to collect the money contributed by foreigners to the benefit show entitled “For the victims.” We think it is convenient that this appointment be widely known.

The jury voted unanimously to sentence the author, Miguel Zomoza, to the maximum penalty of six months of prison. Where is the insult? We can only try to understand the verdict if we imagine this passage being read aloud in a café or in the City Council room with a specific intonation. Perhaps the key was in the context of a personal rivalry or a story that, though not given to print, was well known to members of the jury.

Juries were more apt than judges to deal with the fluid boundaries between oral and written language that characterized public culture, and with the variety of media involved in attacks against reputation. Newspapers were most commonly accused for statements in the section called *gacetilla*, a mix of news and opinions usually written without signature by staff or editors—just like the lines that insulted Napheggi. *Gacetilla* copy resembled the loose tone of a casual street conversation between friends. Pamphlets could also be the object of accusations, but I did not find a single book being challenged. Writers of blackboards with news and advertisements, used in Mexico City and other towns, could also be judged as journalists. Although usually no more than a few handwritten copies, pasquinades were also thought to be dangerous because their effect was multiplied many times by verbal exchanges about their salacious contents.
The five volumes at the Mexico City municipal archives document the local dimension of national freedom. The press jury’s connections with local governance and society provides the key to understand the Mexican history of public opinion. Since the earliest legislation, press juries occupied a hybrid place that overlapped with judicial, administrative and municipal authorities. There was a permanent tension between the jury as a representative of local corporations and urban dwellers, on the one hand, and judges and the political authorities who appointed them, on the other. As a result, contemporaries understood the press jury as a defense of local freedoms against central censorship. Any interference by the federal government with Ayuntamiento elections could be construed as an attempt against freedom of speech. This was the argument in a 1877 case brought against Alfredo Bablot, who had accused president Díaz of attempting the assassination of a rival. Bablot’s defense asked jurors to recuse themselves from the case because Díaz had replaced the City Council elected the year before in disputed elections with a “municipal comission.” According to Bablot, “It would be a sarcasm that the jury, whose origin and respectability comes from the people, was formed by a City Council that is not the legitimate representative of the popular will.” The debate became incresingly agitated, one juror stood up and left, and the whole meeting adjourned in chaos.
Bablot’s argument touched the hybrid nature of the institution. The press jury involved the City Council, which summoned jurors and housed the process; it also required the participation of administrative authorities (the police arresting suspects and seizing copies of the publication), judicial authorities (a judge), and political authorities (prosecutors, offended public officials).

Most importantly, however, was the participation of vecinos as members of the jury. The involvement of city neighbors is the most important feature of the Mexican press jury and, I will argue, gave disputes about honor a central role in the constitution of republican citizenship. Vecindad was not about birth, income or ethnicity, but about roots in the community, personal relationships, face-to-face interactions with other neighbors. There is a long history to the idea of vecindad in Spain and its colonies, where it articulated membership and rights in towns. Vecindad included rights and duties and connected traditional communitarian bonds and modern citizenship. Scholars of indigenous and rural communities have found that vecindad was a central element of Mexican political participation in the nineteenth century, constituting a form of representation that is easy to miss if the focus is on elections, civil wars or popular rebellions. Press juries show that vecindad was the foundation for the emergence of a public sphere in republican Mexico.
The five volumes contain abundant information about the links of vecindad. The City Council drew the names of from a list of all the residents of the city who fulfilled the requirements of the law, also compiled by municipal authorities. Jurors had to be male and have a profession or income, be able to read, and not belong to the government, the army or the clergy. (Early legislations established steep income requirements but the 1861 law had no provisions about income.) The Ayuntamiento compiled and published these lists—which today are neatly folded inside the volumes.

The number of potential jurors remained relatively small throughout the century. The largest number of names is 2,491, in the 1847 list. In the last decade of work of the press jury the lists included between 1000 and 700 names. It is clear that this is not the total number of people who fulfilled the requirements: the city had about 300,000 inhabitants in 1880 and nearly a half of them were literate.

Why only hundreds instead of thousands? The reason is that jurors belonged to what Justo Sierra called the “thinking country,” a population defined by its literacy but, most importantly, by the fact that each of their members, according to Sierra, “has personality, is often in touch with local passions and needs, and sometimes with politics in general.” A list of potential jurors with information about trade, from 1832, shows a relatively heterogeneous group—in spite of existing income requirements: from 730 men listed, 290 were merchants, 96 ecclesiastics (not excluded by the law at
the time), 94 agriculturalists (*labradores*), 80 property owners, 44 artisans, 43 lawyers, 43 bakers and 40 butchers.

From the point of view of the City Council members who drew these lists, character was more important than trade. Being in the list meant becoming part of a public of notables, as names were posted every December on the corners of the city for everyone to receive notice. The lists contained the names and addresses of vecinos deemed literate and responsible according to the personal knowledge of the members of the Council: the five volumes contain several draft lists in which aldermen jotted down comments next to proposed names. In 1828, for example, the City Council decided to nullify the list used the previous year because it contained names council members ignored or considered suspicious of having low “opinions about our system,” or being “the enemies of the fatherland.” Instead, the council added citizens whose patriotism “they have demonstrated in so many ways.” The governor of the Federal District objected to the procedure, arguing that City Council’s role was not to vote “on each person” in the list but merely to eliminate those who did not fulfill the requirements of the law. But it is clear that in the following years aldermen continued to rely on personal knowledge in compiling lists that included relatively few names.

Being a vecino meant being a member of the community, a resident with good reputation, and reputation was a key attribute of political agency
in republican times. The 1857 Constitution included “honest means of living” as requisite of citizenship. The 1861 press law put citizenship to the test of practice by asking vecinos to decide matters of honor.

Gossip, gacetilla, pasquinades, speeches: debates about personal honor reveal the interconnectedness of political and cultural phenomena. What started as a conversation in the city’s plaza could easily end as a pamphlet or a newspaper polemic. Free speech was not so much the articulation of ideology, as in traditional political history, but the performance of integrity in a local setting.

These connections are useful to engage critically with recent histories of the public sphere in Latin America, which tend to emphasize the perspective of intellectual history. The contribution of recent intellectual historians like José Elías Palti or Rafael Rojas is immensely valuable as a critique of the traditional narratives that dominated political history until recently. However, these authors tend to emphasize the reading public as the only rational actor, to evaluate membership to the public sphere as a function of literacy and, with some exceptions, to discount gossip and the personal dimension of political disputes as petty anecdotes in the history of important men and canonical texts. Public opinion in these accounts is only interested in lofty themes of public policy but not in private reputations, and the problem is to understand how it was defined, not how it worked. The
result is that, to use a common formulation, some authors believe that all 
citizens in nineteenth-century Mexico were imaginary citizens. The five 
volumes in the Mexico City archives give us a clear lesson on how to read 
the emergence of the public sphere as a socially complex, thematically open 
process rather than a self-contained elite history of ideas. They show how 
citizenship was a material reality constantly defended in everyday life. 

Studies of Mexican state formation tends to focus on sovereignty, 
nationalism, representation and the discursive interaction between civil 
society and state. My research shows how this history is also one of the 
creation of publics, a category explored by historians like Michael Warner. 
Audiences become actors when they converge around certain media, themes 
and emotions. In Mexico City, men and women filled the Ayuntamiento 
meeting room or read newspapers because they were fascinated by the 
intersection of public and private life exposed in those debates. Honor was 
the theme that gave this public a focus and made them judges of individual 
reputations.

The interaction between private honor and public opinion was stronger 
during the 1870s, when the press jury and freedom of speech flourished in 
Mexico City. This was also the reason for their demise. When Congress 
abolished the press jury in 1882 the change was accepted, even by some 
journalists, as necessary to defend private life against belligerent writers. A 
reform of article 7 of the Constitution gave jurisdiction to criminal judges
over offenses committed by the press. Díaz used his personal influence during Manuel González’s presidency to push for the reform. But jurists also supported the idea arguing that the press jury had a hybrid status and gave journalists a special jurisdiction, or fuero, similar to the privileges granted in the past to the church and the army. It was, in other words, a corporative remnant in an era of rational codification emanating from the center. After 1882, criminal judges played a largely successful role in dissuading journalists from attacking men in positions of power—although many continued to do it and suffer short but disruptive prison sentences and the loss of presses.

The authoritarian government of Porfirio Díaz succeeded in establishing an effective control of the press based on a positivist notion of honor. This meant shifting the meaning of honor to that of a private good, rather than an object of debate and public opinion. Honor became a protected juridical good, part of the material capital associated with a good reputation, an object of state protection just like private property. A positivist notion of honor replaced the romantic ideas I described today. As the Mexican economy was changing and the participation of foreign investors and customers was growing, it was now more important than ever to uphold modern standards of financial and personal responsibility.

The regime of Díaz truncated the democratic expansion of the public sphere by appropriating honor to silence dissent and to solidify class and
gender hierarchies in the name of science. When the revolution brought him down, the Mexican public sphere was too narrow to effectively channel popular mobilization. The civil war made possible a new political order that was more integrative in its political language and able to give voice to groups formerly silenced by power. Yet the post-revolutionary regime was also characterized by an effective control of the press through co-optation, some repression, and a 1917 Press Law that was particularly severe in the protection of reputation. Both the Porfirian and postrevolutionary regimes used a combination of threats and rewards to control the press, but they also maintained a strict rule: journalism would never touch the private life of politicians, no matter how corrupt or outrageous their behavior.

The history of the public sphere in Mexico contains periods of expansion and contraction. But also, as important as size, includes changes the rules that allowed actors to access it and to speak in the name of reason and public opinion. A close examination of the rules of honor is necessary if we are going to understand the intensity of Mexican citizens’ concern about what could be said and by whom. This story might seem irrelevant after the twentieth century saw collective actors stake their political claims as such, but it for these men of honor it was a moment of modernity, individualism and egalitarian sentiment that, at the time, could not be construed as anything but progress.