Source 1:
Alexander Von Humboldt:
Problems And Progress in Mexico, c. 1800

Alexander von Humboldt was a German scientist who left a detailed description of his visits to the Spanish Empire around 1800. The laws of Spain prevented entry to all non-Spanish Europeans to the Spanish Empire. Humboldt’s comments as an outsider are then, especially valuable.

Mexico is the country of inequality. Nowhere does there exist such a (shocking) difference in the distribution of fortune, civilization, cultivation of the soil, and population. The interior of the country contains four cities, which are not more than one or two days' journey distant from one another, and possess a population of 35,000, 67,000, 70,000, and 135,000... The capital and several other cities have scientific establishments, which will bear a comparison with those of Europe. The architecture of the public and private structures, the elegance of the furniture, the luxury and dress of the women, the tone of society, all announce a refinement to which the nakedness, ignorance, and vulgarity of the lower people form the most striking contrast. This immense inequality of fortune does not only exist among the whites (Europeans), it is even discoverable among the Indians.

The Mexican Indians, when we consider them (as a whole), offer a picture of extreme misery. Banished into the most barren districts, and (lazy) from nature, and more still from their political situation, the natives live only from hand to mouth. We should seek almost in vain among them for individuals who enjoy anything like a certain mediocrity of fortune. Instead, however, of a comfortable independency, we find a few families whose fortune appears so much the more colossal, as we least expect it among the lowest class of the people. In the intendancies of Oaxaca and Valladolid, in the valley of Toluca, and especially in the environs of the great city of la Puebla de los Angeles, we find several Indians, who under an appearance of poverty conceal considerable wealth. When I visited the small city of Cholula, an old Indian woman was buried there, who left to her children plantations of maguey (agave) worth more than 360,000 francs. These plantations are the vineyards and sole wealth of the country.
Source 2:

George M. McBride: Haciendas from *The Land Systems of Mexico, 1923*

The laborers on the haciendas, in most parts of Mexico, are of Indian blood or are mestizos (who look like Indians). . . The workers upon a Mexican hacienda are theoretically free...As a matter of fact, however, many of them (remain) upon the estate not by bondage but because it is sanctioned only by custom and enforced only by economic conditions. . . By a system of advance payments, which the workers are totally unable to refund, the owners are able to keep them permanently under financial obligations and hence to oblige them to remain upon the estates to which they belonged. . . The daily wages paid to the worker who work on the haciendas have always been very low....seldom paid in money. Ordinarly for his labor he is given a due bill or time check to be negotiated at the store maintained by the hacienda--with obvious results. On the other hand, the actual wage earned is not the only compensation that the worker receives.

Certain privileges, if one might so describe them, have been established by custom, which lessen the lot of the Indian laborer. Thus he occupies a hut upon the estate without being called upon to pay rent. He is usually allowed a *milpa*, a piece of land for his own use, and this may provide at least a part of his living. Moreover, while he is forced to resort to the hacienda store, he enjoys a credit there sufficient to tide him over in the event of a general crop failure. Actually, however, so meager is the pay received by the worker that he is kept in the most abject poverty, and few opportunities of escape from the bondage imposed by the established system ever present themselves. Obviously, this situation has greatly encouraged the emigration of rural laborers from Mexico to the southwestern part of the United States. Official figures given by the U. S. Bureau of Immigration show that between 1899 and 1919 there was an average yearly movement of 10,320 immigrants from Mexico into this country, in addition to the seasonal migration. These figures are thought to represent only a part of the actual movement, since conditions on the border make it easy for the immigrant to avoid registration. The full tide of emigration of Mexican laborers is thought by some to reach as high as 100,000 a year.
Caste and Politics in the Struggle for Mexican Independence

by Hana Layson, Charlotte Ross, and Christopher Boyer

Scholars writing the history of Mexican independence might begin with two straightforward dates: On September 16, 1810, peasants across the countryside responded to Father Miguel Hidalgo’s call to rebellion and took up arms against the Spanish. Eleven years later, Spain agreed to recognize Mexico as an independent country. But it would be a mistake to assume a simple cause-and-effect relationship between these two events. Mexico’s struggle for independence presents historians with a number of complications that resist straightforward narrative.

To understand this series of events, it’s necessary to explore both the wider, international context for Mexican independence and the internal, social conditions of New Spain. Independence movements in Mexico and throughout South America were, in part, sparked by turmoil in Spain itself. In 1808 Napoleon invaded the Iberian Peninsula, forced the king of Spain to abdicate the throne, and installed his brother as ruler. As a result, the government of Spain became illegitimate in the eyes of its own citizens… This upheaval within Spain not only encouraged stronger local governments throughout the empire, it also created an opportunity for people in the Spanish colonies to advance the cause of independence.

Spain had established the colony of New Spain, with Mexico City as its capital, after conquering the Aztec Empire in 1521. At its height in the late eighteenth century, New Spain stretched from present-day western Canada south through North America, west of the Mississippi and including the Caribbean, to the
Systems of Empire in Mexico Sources

northern tip of South America. (Spain’s South American territories were administered under the separate Viceroyalty of Peru.)

Spain maintained control of its colonies by imposing two distinct legal systems: one that pertained to Europeans (the república de españoles) and one for native peoples (the república de indios). In practice, racial mixing produced a much more complicated social reality. As a result, social status in colonial Mexico was the result of a caste system, or social hierarchy based on differences in wealth, inherited rank, culture, and skin color. European-born Spaniards received the greatest social privileges and legal protections. The next tier included criollos, also known as creoles (Mexican-born people of Spanish descent who were considered white). Below them were people of mixed European and Indian ancestry, known as mestizos, and indigenous people (Indians of many different cultures and languages). Finally, there were people of African descent, many of whom shared some European or Indian ancestry, and were referred to as mulattoes or grouped with mestizos. Indians and Afro-Mexicans were subject to severe discrimination and segregation and about 10 percent of Afro-Mexicans were slaves.

Individuals from all of these groups—except the European-born Spaniards—participated in the insurrection. But, as historian Virginia Guedea argues, they held different goals. Criollo sympathizers lived primarily in the cities and focused on the issue of political autonomy from Spain. They “sought to create more opportunities for Americans to govern themselves.” The people who filled the ranks of fighters were rural peasants and workers, largely Indian and Afro-Mexican, whose main concern was “access to land and improved working conditions,” including ending slavery and the caste system. The rebels’ demands to change social conditions within Mexico alienated many criollos from the independence cause. Many criollos were unwilling to risk losing their property or privileges, and feared for their personal safety.

From the beginning, the war involved extraordinary acts of violence on both sides and this violence often gave the conflict more the appearance of a caste war or civil war than a war for independence. For example, the peasants who accompanied Hidalgo in the first days of the uprising slaughtered whole groups of Spanish nobles, including women and children. Spanish troops, in turn, committed violence not only against rebel fighters, but also against villages
suspected of supporting the insurrection. After capturing and executing Hidalgo in July 1811, the Spanish displayed his severed head on a post for the remaining 10 years of the war.

By 1820 people throughout New Spain were exhausted by the violence. Resistance to Spanish rule was collapsing. However, the Spanish Empire was also in fragments. The Spanish king, Fernando VII, had been restored to power, but even so, between 1810 and 1821, much of Latin America had become independent. In 1820 Fernando VII temporarily implemented a more liberal constitution, extending political and property rights to more people, including Indians, throughout the empire. Ironically, it was this liberalization of Spanish government that prompted Iturbide, a conservative royalist, to change sides and fight for independence. The treaty that he negotiated with Spain, known as the Plan of Iguala, called for a constitutional monarchy in Mexico with a European ruler; equal rights for criollos and Spaniards (but not other groups); and establishment of the Roman Catholic Church as the national religion. In 1822 Iturbide dissolved Congress and declared himself emperor of Mexico. He was overthrown a year later and Mexico would be ruled by a series of dictators until the Mexican Revolution of 1910–1920 produced the country’s modern constitution.
Source 4:

Skin Color Linked to Social Inequality in Contemporary Mexico, Study Shows

Oct. 6, 2010

AUSTIN, Texas — Despite the popular, state-sponsored ideology that denies the existence of prejudice based on racial or skin color differences in Mexico, a new study from The University of Texas at Austin provides evidence of profound social inequality by skin color.

According to the study, individuals with darker skin tones have less education, have lower status jobs and are more likely to live in poverty and less likely to be affluent.

Andrés Villarreal, associate professor in the Department of Sociology and Population Research Center affiliate, will publish his finding in the October issue of American Sociological Review.

He found a high level of agreement among respondents of a nationally representative survey of more than 2,000 participants about who belongs to three basic skin color categories (blanco/güero — or white; moreno claro — or light brown; and moreno oscuro — or dark brown). In addition, he investigated how skin color is associated with a person’s socioeconomic status.

Respondents who are light brown have 29.5 percent lower odds of having a college education or more compared to those who are white, while those who are dark brown have 57.6 percent lower odds.

The difference in occupational status between light-brown and white respondents, and especially between dark-brown and white respondents, is substantially reduced once education level is introduced as a predictor. In other words, the disparity in access to education among respondents in different color categories may explain a large part, but not all, of the observed differences in occupational status.

Respondents in the lowest occupational categories, such as domestic workers, manual workers, drivers and security guards, are much more likely to be in the dark-brown category and less likely to be in the white category than are respondents in the highest status occupations, such as office supervisors, professional workers and employers. Only 9.4 percent of manual workers are considered white, compared with 28.4 percent of professionals. Light-brown workers have 25.2 percent lower odds of being a professional worker.
than whites, while a dark-brown respondent has 35.9 percent lower odds of being in the top two occupational categories than a white respondent.

"These differences in socioeconomic outcomes are, of course, insufficient to demonstrate the persistence of discriminatory practices against individuals based on the color of their skin," Villarreal says. "However, the fact that differences in occupational status across skin color categories cannot be fully explained by other factors, suggests that Mexicans with darker skin tones may in fact face discrimination in the labor market."