BEYOND INSULARITY:
The Challenge of Nineteenth-Century Mexican History

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ESSAYS ON THE MEXICAN WAR. Edited by Douglas W. Richmond. (College Station: Texas A & M University Press for the University of Texas at Arlington, 1986. Pp. 99. $17.50.)

TO CONQUER A PEACE: THE WAR BETWEEN THE UNITED STATES AND MEXICO. By John Edward Weems. (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 1988. Pp. 500. $29.50 cloth, $16.95 paper.)

THE POLITICAL PLANS OF MEXICO. By Thomas B. Davis and Amado Ricon Virulegio. (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1987. Pp. 687. $38.50.)

VERACRUZ LIBERAL, 1858–1860. By Carmen Blázquez Domínguez. (Mexico City: El Colegio de México and the Gobierno del Estado de Veracruz, 1986. Pp. 269.)

EL CONSTITUYENTE DE 1842. By Cecilia Noriega Elío. (Mexico City: Instituto de Investigaciones Históricas, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1986. Pp. 251.)

BANCA Y PODER EN MEXICO (1800–1925). Edited by Leonor Ludlow and Carlos Marichal. (Mexico City: Editorial Grijalbo, 1986. Pp. 427.)

TEXTILES AND CAPITALISM IN MEXICO: AN ECONOMIC HISTORY OF THE OBRAJES, 1539–1840. By Richard J. Salvucci. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1987. Pp. 249. $40.00.)

THE JUAREZ MYTH IN MEXICO. By Charles A. Weeks. (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1987. Pp. 204. $24.95.)

JUDAS AT THE JOCKEY CLUB AND OTHER EPISODES OF PORFIRIAN MEXICO. By William H. Beezley. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987. Pp. 181. $19.95 cloth, $8.95 paper.)

Until very recently, the history of nineteenth-century Latin America remained in the hands of traditional military and political historians. Although new methods of social, cultural, and quantitative history have transformed scholars' understanding of the colonial period and the twentieth century, with few exceptions the nineteenth century has remained a bastion of insular history, punctuated by great battles and populated by great men. Nowhere was this truer than in Mexican history. Its colonial

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historians stood at the forefront of innovation in demography, ethnohistory, and economic history, and historians of the Revolution of 1910 pioneered in social history and peasant studies. But the nineteenth century remained the epoch of the *caudillo* and the proclamation of the Pastry War and Santa Anna's leg.

Although the nine books reviewed here vary greatly in topic, approach, and time period, they nevertheless make a good starting point for discussing the kind of work now being done on nineteenth-century Mexico in terms of what has been accomplished as well as what still needs to be done. These works range from the more traditional and well-known forms of narrative military or political history—as variously manifested in the first five books on the list—to the attempts by Charles Weeks and William Beezley to apply some of the more current techniques of *mentalité* and symbolic analysis. In between, the edited collection by Leonor Ludlow and Carlos Marichal and the monograph by Richard Salvucci both employ methods of economic and financial history broadly to examine aspects of the transition to capitalism during what is increasingly being called the "middle period" or "long nineteenth century" (1780–1930) (Mallon 1986; Szuchman 1989).[1]

Taken together, the narrative histories focus almost exclusively on the first half-century after independence, especially on crucial political or military junctures like the Constituent Congress of 1842 (Noriega), the U.S.-Mexican War (Weems and Richmond), and the 1858–1861 Civil War (Blázquez). Even Thomas Davis and Amado Ricon, who treat the political plans that inspired or legitimized uprisings from Independence through the Revolution of 1910, concentrate de facto on the years between 1825 and 1876 because these were the years with the greatest number of plans. Although variously ambitious in analytical scope, these books stay pretty much in their genre, providing little in the way of social context. Indeed, from reading them, it would be impossible to glean any clues as to the growing influence of the field of social history over the past fifteen years.

Of the first five books, *The Political Plans of Mexico* seems the most frozen in time. Most of the book is dedicated to reproducing translated versions of some two hundred plans, defined as "public declaration[s] issued in order to indicate principles or practices which should form the basis for a reform proposal in the national administration of the Mexican state" (p. ix). Spanning the period from 1810 to 1940, this exercise alone is useful for scholars and teachers of Mexican history. But beyond this

1. These terms were also used by participants in a 1987 panel entitled "From Imperial Reform to World Depression: The Middle Period of Latin American History." It was organized by commentator Stuart Voss and featured papers by Elizabeth Kuznesof, John Tutino, and Florencia Mallon. The panel was presented at the meeting of the American Historical Association, 27–30 Dec., Washington, D.C.

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accomplishment, the authors have little to offer. Davis and Ricon assert that they arranged the plans in chronological order "since we are Historians and Time is dear to us" (p. xi). Yet the lengthy analytical introduction by Davis provides no clues as to why time should be dear. What, if anything, changes over one hundred and thirty years of plans? Do differing social circumstances at diverse moments during that century and a quarter have any impact on the plans? Readers are left with a confusing sense of insularity, circularity, and lack of historical movement. For example, the Cristero Manifesto and other pronouncements by the movement are equated with those of the Hidalgo Revolt (p. 84) and with an uneducated Zapatismo: "Another Zapata just out of the hills might very well have drafted its terms" (p. 121). Instead of encountering a dialogue with the existing historiography on any period, readers are treated to vague symbolic generalizations, like this conclusion to the introductory section: "Yet somehow the yarns of unrelated Plans weave together the dismembered circumstances that form the warp of the nation's history" (p. 125). Most students of Mexican history have, at one point or another, been frustrated to learn that the plans do nothing of the sort. Nor, predictably, do they weave together the dismembered elements of *The Political Plans of Mexico*.

The two volumes on the U.S.-Mexican War achieve their purposes in a more satisfactory manner. Douglas Richmond's collection of lectures given at the University of Texas at Arlington, *Essays on the Mexican War,* is a dispersed and fragmented text, with each chapter remaining a separate entity. It nevertheless conveys some useful information: that President James Polk received support for the war effort in New England in the summer of 1847; that the intense conflicts between Polk and Generals Winfield Scott and Zachary Taylor caused major problems during important military campaigns and arose from the U.S. Army's lack of professionalization (this last conclusion made in a mildly positivistic vein); and that internal factors (including a short-lived monarchist conspiracy in 1846 aimed at placing a Spanish sovereign on a Mexican throne as well as conservative fears that pacifism might lead to the regular army being replaced by the civic militias) underlay the reluctance of the Mariano Paredes government to avoid confrontation with the United States. In the end, however, no substantive unifying theme emerges from *Essays on the Mexican War* and certainly no effort to look beyond the diplomatic, military, and political surface of the conflict.

A reprint of a 1974 publication, John Edward Weems's *To Conquer a Peace* is the most compelling and ambitious of the volumes examined so far. A well-written narrative using the diaries and letters of participating U.S. soldiers to place readers within the action, the book's battle scenes crackle with the intensity of confrontation while reproducing the on-the-ground confusion of war. Weems examines the policies of the Polk admin-

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istration critically and gives sympathetic space to the doubts of some young officers over the legitimacy of the conflict as a whole. He even considers the role played by racism in facilitating war and the role of war in perpetuating racism. These substantial strengths, however, do not apply to the Mexican side of the conflict, which remains clouded in generalities, in contrast to the inspired detail with which the U.S. side is portrayed.

Welcome antidotes to the U.S.-centered perspective of the two books on the U.S.-Mexican War, the volumes by Cecilia Noriega Elío and Carmen Blázquez Domínguez represent the efforts of a new generation of Mexican historians of Mexico who have deeply immersed themselves in the relevant national or regional archives. Although Noriega limits herself to covering only three years between 1841 and 1843, she has produced a meaty analysis of the political problems facing Mexican political elites at this crucial juncture. Essentially, *El constituyente de 1842* recounts how liberalism, with its various internal currents, was constructed in Mexico before 1855. Following a federalist revolution in 1841, a congress dominated by younger men from the provinces met in 1842 to draft a constitution. The federalist document they produced—based on an expanded definition of *citizen* that was rooted in an autonomous right to suffrage, was buttressed by a judicial branch to guard individual liberties, and featured a strong legislative branch to balance the power of the executive—proved too radical for the government in power, and the army shut down the congress. This incident, Noriega implies, proved a crucial formative experience for many of the individuals who later led the 1855 revolution, for it made clear that federalism and liberalism would be constructed together and that if liberals were to build a more enduring control of the state, they would have to do so on an expanded social base. Thus the lessons of 1842 would be applied in 1855 and beyond.

In *Veracruz liberal, 1858–1860,* Blázquez also tackles a three-year period: the Liberal-Conservative civil war and particularly the years when the Juárez government established itself in Veracruz. But unlike Noriega, Blázquez is not interested in reaching for broader implications. Instead, she stays close to her municipal and notarial documents, offering a detailed picture of the factionalism within the liberal camp as well as the effect of war on the local population. The benefits of such an approach should replace in regional clarity what is lost in global scope. Unfortunately, however, Blázquez uses local archival sources for only four municipalities in the center of the state of Veracruz, treating the extremely interesting social and ethnic conflicts in the Huasteca and Sotavento regions only briefly in a discussion based on secondary sources. Finally, even the clarity achieved for the four central *municipios* is flawed by a relatively unimaginative use of the documents in municipal archives.

In contrast to the perspective of the political and military histories, the studies by Salvucci and those edited by Ludlow and Marichal are

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self-consciously revisionist attempts at new economic and financial history. Ludlow and Marichal assert in their introduction to *Banca y poder en México (1800–1925),* "Los análisis del crédito y la banca durante largo tiempo han sido relegados a un segundo plano en las investigaciones históricas sobre México y América Latina" (p. 15). Their edited collection attempts to reverse this tendency, setting itself three interrelated goals: to bring together some of the research currently being done in Mexico, hoping to inspire more research into banking and financial history; to begin testing and debating the approaches developed for the history of banking in Europe; and to focus on banking and credit as social relationships involving not only the financial actors themselves but the whole of society. For its part, Salvucci's *Textiles and Capitalism in Mexico: An Economic History of the Obrajes, 1539–1840* seeks to revise the existing image of *obrajes* as proto-factories, using a neoclassical economic approach inspired by price theory. Through a detailed analysis of obrajes as firms, Salvucci finds that they were not embryonic factories because systems of coerced labor, family relations in investment, and imperfect transportation and marketing made them rigid enterprises unable to adapt to the new conditions of British competition after independence.

Although the goals of both books are laudable, neither volume entirely lives up to its objectives. Overall, *Banca y poder en México* succeeds best in the sections treating the transition from more informal, merchant-centered credit networks to the first formalized banks, tracing in the process the role of foreign capital, the Mexican state, and notable elite families (see especially the essays by Mario Cerutti, Barbara Tenenbaum, and Raquel Barceló). Beyond these areas, *Banca y poder* tends to get lost in precisely the kind of narrative institutional history of banks it implicitly rejects in the introduction. And while other essays provide some interesting information or analysis—such as Marichal's discussion of the applicability of European concepts to Latin America (pp. 234–35) or Hilda Sánchez's description of attempted financial reforms during the Revolution of 1910 (pp. 377–83, 401–4), overall the book does not consistently provide the social history of finance promised by the editors.

In Salvucci's case, the "macro" perspective of *Textiles and Capitalism in Mexico* proves both a strength and a weakness. On the plus side, the overview of obrajes provides "a relatively powerful but nevertheless simple view of the forces of institutional and economic change" (p. 7) in the woolen industry as a whole. Yet at the same time, this approach necessarily leaves out a more in-depth consideration of the informal, peasant-controlled cotton production in *telares sueltos,* especially of the interrelationship between this production and the obrajes. A more nuanced and detailed regional perspective on these interrelationships might have helped to answer the question of why, if the obrajes cannot themselves be considered the precursors or embryos of the modern textile industry, this

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industry nonetheless tended to develop in precisely the regions where obrajes had previously existed. Did the modern industry in fact grow on the back of the telares? And if so, what was the historic relationship between them and the obrajes? These questions remain open for future research into the social history of textile production.

The last pair of books to be considered delve into the history of culture and political culture. In *The Juárez Myth in Mexico,* Charles Weeks explores the myth building around Benito Juárez as *the* representative of Mexican nationality and its uses. Weeks argues that during most of Juárez's years in power, he was not a popular leader, weathering numerous crises when he was accused of being authoritarian and circumventing the constitution. Death intervened in Juárez's favor, however, and facilitated his being transformed by the late Porfiriato into the preferred metaphor through which "true" *mexicanidad* could be defined and debated. Since that time, the metaphorical Juárez has been manipulated by radicals and conservatives alike. In a sense, the power of the metaphor lay precisely in its lack of direct connection with Juárez as a real historical figure. Porfirian painters, influenced by European styles, whitened Juárez in their paintings. Then later on, revolutionary muralists like Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, and David Alfaro Siqueiros purposely "Indianized" his features. In both extremes, Juárez's actual appearance was altered to represent the dominant "national" essence sought by each artist. The same kind of modifications were made of Juárez's political image, with radicals and conservatives alike finding in Juárez's actions precisely what they wanted to praise or condemn most. The incredible plasticity of his image resulted in such "a multifaceted Juárez" that Hugh Hamill, Jr., was prompted to ask rhetorically, "Will the real Juárez please stand up?" (cited in Weeks, p. 139).

It is interesting to note that in a book published too late to be considered by Weeks, Oaxacan artist Francisco Toledo takes precisely the opposite tack in attempting to deconstruct the Juárez myth. Toledo portrays Juárez as unchanging and immutable. According to the prologue written by Carlos Monsiváis, Juárez was "from the outset . . . a live statue" (Toledo 1986, 10). In Monsiváis's view, "There is no way to 'demythify' Don Benito":

> Juárez is unalterable—whatever he does and is made to do will not make him any less Juárez. He is beyond both respect and lack of respect, and therefore he can and he must, at his ease, go fishing and skating, take part in community fiestas, scrutinize newlywed women and women giving birth, reduce his size or become a giant at will, suffer reverential treatment from iguanas and crabs and turtles and deer, go through the looking-glass, allow himself to be followed by womenfolk, as well as lead Nature into seduction or agitation. (Toledo 1986, 11)

These are the scenes—ironic and evenly mildly ridiculous—in which Toledo's paintings place the familiar bust of Juárez, simultaneously dimin-

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ishing and aggrandizing the immutable image. And yet, as suggested by Toledo's title, *Lo que el viento a Juárez,* these manipulations do as much to the Juárez myth as the wind did to Juárez: "They shake his hat. That's all" (Toledo 1986, 13). Such, one must conclude, is the power of myth—and its multiple uses.

The central image in William Beezley's *Judas at the Jockey Club* is named in the title. It refers to a specific incident that occurred in Mexico City in 1893, when elite society (as represented by the members of the Jockey Club) chose to organize a Judas burning during Holy Week in the center of the city. In a truly brilliant reversal of an already inspired popular ritual of reversal in which the Judas figures usually burned represented members of the dominant classes or polite society, the Jockey Club ritual of 1893 ignited in effigy four figures representing the lower classes: a mulatto, a *mantequillero,* a troubadour, and a beggar. Beezley transforms this incident into the symbolic core of the ongoing conflict between tradition and modernity during the Porfiriato. In Beezley's rendition of modernity as "the Porfirian persuasion," it "showed a rush to accept European and especially American activities, which included sport" (p. 52). Although this persuasion included sports like boxing and baseball, in the end the symbol of the times became the bicycle. Tradition, in contrast, is represented by Beezley as the unchanging bedrock of popular culture and everyday life, which was symbolized by religious rituals like "Judas burnings, Day of the Dead rituals, and Carnival" (p. 88). In his view, the efforts of the modernizers to force progress on the popular classes came to a head in the confrontations over the Judas rituals.

Much of the imagery and analysis in *Judas at the Jockey Club* is compelling, and the minute description and deconstruction of the 1893 Jockey Club incident is inspired (pp. 108–14). Yet the argument as a whole rests on several unexamined and unconvincing assumptions. In Beezley's treatment of the popular classes, it would seem that those who, as "los de abajo," knew to sit in the sun during a bullfight lived in an unchanging, backward, "traditional" culture whose ways had changed little since the Spanish conquest. Into this traditional stability Porfirian modernism struck, exploding for the first time age-old assumptions and practices and bringing new conflicts out into the open. This interpretation does not hold up under closer scrutiny, however. In a recent book on popular culture in Mexico City during the eighteenth century, Juan Pedro Viqueira Albán develops a parallel argument for the 1700s about the ways in which colonial elites attempted to prescribe, control, and ultimately repress the public behavior of plebeian folk, justifying their behavior with references to culture, education, and enlightenment analogous to Porfirians' discourse (Viqueira 1987). Further, when Viqueira examines eighteenth-century popular celebrations and rituals (including bullfights, popular theater, carnival, *posadas, jamaicas,* and religious processions of various

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kinds), he never once mentions a Judas ritual. Could it be that this ritual was not the immutable component of popular culture that Beezley makes it out to have been and might have gotten a particularly strong lease on life only during the nineteenth century? This possibility at least calls into question the unchanging stability of popular culture, as well as the uniqueness of Porfirian reactions to public displays of popular ritual. It suggests instead that popular and elite cultures were constantly being contested and transformed, both internally and in relation to each other. The genuine and deep cultural confrontations of the Porfiriato did not have to depend for their dramatic effect on being the first.

One explanation of Beezley's view of popular culture might be found in the documents on which he relies. Although he criticizes foreign observers for their racist and prejudiced views of Mexican society (pp. 81–83), Beezley nevertheless uses travelers' accounts as one of his main documentary sources. He does so "because these outsiders did not take for granted Mexico's everyday activities, food, clothing, work habits, family arrangements, and housing" (p. x). Yet there are certainly other ways of piecing together the same information, including the use of local documents from judicial, municipal, religious, or even notarial archives that, even if more laborious, might also yield less inescapable bias. Still, it would be a mistake to promote any single type of archival material as the panacea, as Blázquez's use of notarial and municipal archives in *Veracruz liberal* demonstrates that uncritical reading of any type of document can be problematic.

In the end, whatever methodological fault one attaches to the books under review—the lack of social context in some, excessively macro or micro perspectives in others, excessive reliance on narrative or institutional approaches, or their uncritical use of sources—all these works share one characteristic that is typical of much nineteenth-century historical work on Mexico. They are or tend to become insular. While the historical literature on the Revolution of 1910 has undergone three major revisions in the past two decades and whereas broad interpretations have become the order of the day, historians of the nineteenth century have tended to carve out small periods, regions, or single individuals on which to focus. The result is that (with some notable exceptions like the work of John Coatsworth, Jean Meyer, Leticia Reina, and John Tutino) the field as a whole has remained distressingly parochial and unrenovated. This tendency has had an equally negative effect on the historiographies of both the nineteenth century and the Revolution.

Historians of Mexico are aware that the Revolution has cast a long shadow across Mexican history, both forward and backward in time. Historians of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional have produced an "official version" that has been hard to overcome. The nineteenth century has generally been viewed as the "ancien régime," with the origins of the

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1910–1920 conflagration sought in the abuses and violence of the previous one hundred years. Since the late 1960s and early 1970s, scholars of the Tlatelolco and post-Tlatelolco generations have struggled with the nature of the Mexican state and the definition of Mexican authoritarianism, sometimes looking backward to the Porfiriato for their model of authoritarian politics. Such approaches, however, have tended to turn the nineteenth century into a peripheral field, condemned to serving out a seemingly inevitable sentence as the dependent variable of, or handmaiden to, revolutionary history. And the generally insular nature of nineteenth-century historiography has helped to reproduce its peripheral role.

Perhaps only fittingly, this insularity has also stymied the further development of literature on the Revolution itself. Without a theoretically informed perspective on the social, cultural, and political trends of the nineteenth century, historians of twentieth-century Mexico have made assumptions about the traditional and unchanging nature of popular culture and consciousness that have hurt our understanding of revolutionary processes. As the wheel of interpretation has continued to turn in revolutionary historiography—from popular agrarian revolution to bourgeois revolution to *caciquismo* and no revolution at all back to popular agrarian revolution—some have begun to look to the nineteenth century for aid in preventing this wheel from turning in a vicious circle.

Despite significant contributions, some of the most widely debated recent work on the nineteenth century has unfortunately reproduced the dualisms between modern and traditional, elite and popular that also mar Beezley's work (see Guerra 1985). But signs are emerging of a new, theoretically grounded dialogue among nineteenth- and twentieth-century historians of Mexico, one that takes a dynamic view of popular culture and peasant movements as its starting point (see, for example, Katz 1988 and Nugent 1988). This development is a most welcome one that may inspire us to examine nineteenth-century plans, civil wars, and constituent congresses as well as twentieth-century caciques, revolutionary factions, and social movements from a new perspective. As the Mexican political system undergoes what is arguably its most dramatic reorganization since the 1930s, such a conceptual overhaul among historians is long overdue.

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