

THE USES AND ABUSES OF COMPARATIVE HISTORY

DOS REVOLUCIONES MÉXICO Y LOS ESTADOS UNIDOS. Edited by JOSEFINA Z. VÁZQUEZ and RICHARD B. MORRIS. (Mexico: Editorial Jus, S.A., 1976. Pp. 222.)

Historians in general, especially American historians, have not been notably interested in comparative studies. Until recent years at least, Clio's disciples have been markedly conservative in the way they have viewed their craft—"conservative about everything but their politics," as the saying goes. Even so, the subject of the American Revolution has been something of an exception, and probably because such comparisons were employed to the advantage of the United States. For our historians, to say nothing of Fourth of July orators, have sought to demonstrate how revolutionary and liberal movements throughout the world have sought to line up behind the Spirit of '76.

It is not surprising that we have seen our revolution in this manner; that in fact was how the Founding Fathers predicted it would affect mankind. They believed the American Revolution was a turning point in world history. Henceforth kings were doomed as people came to realize from the American Revolution that men should be free to rule themselves. Jefferson once went so far as to propose that the Great Seal of the United States depict the Israelites pursuing a beam of light, which would illustrate that his countrymen were divinely ordained to reform the world.

The result of this intellectual heritage has been that we have looked for the similarities between our revolutionary tradition and upheavals in other quarters of the globe. "Seek and ye shall find," sayeth the proverb, and so it has been from Jefferson to the present. Yet contrasts and differences are equally valid elements of comparative analysis, and they suggest a need for Americans to rethink the matter of our revolution's international role. Moreover, our own times—our setbacks in Southeast Asia and the spread of Marxist ideology in the Third World—call for a sober reassessment of our impact upon other peoples in various places and periods.

A constructive step in this direction is the appearance of *Dos Revoluciones México y Los Estados Unidos*, papers and commentaries delivered at a two-day conference in Mexico City under the joint sponsorship of the American Historical Association and El Colegio de México. They reveal the differences between the American and Mexican movements to be vastly more significant than the similarities. Indeed, only one scholar, Richard B. Morris of Columbia University, attempts to demonstrate a relatively close kinship, and even he usually does not strain the comparisons, conceding the reefs and shoals of comparative history.

Morris brings impressive credentials to his undertaking; he, more than any other recent investigator, has attempted to examine the American Revolution in global perspective, having authored *The Emerging Nations and the American*

Revolution and coedited with Josefina Vázquez and Elías Trabulse a new anthology, *The War of Independence in Mexico and the United States*. In New Spain and the English colonies, Morris reminds us, there were incipient manifestations of nationalism, of feelings that British-American provincials and Spanish-American Creoles both were a distinct people with interests and aspirations not always compatible with those of the homelands. A handful of visionary souls in both empires perceived that the trans-Atlantic dependencies had matured to the point of needing a substantial degree of autonomy—Franklin, for one, with his Plan of Union in 1754; and the Conde de Aranda, for another, who proposed self-rule for New Spain. Similarly, the issue of taxation sparked agitation against the metropolis not only in Boston and Charleston but in Mexico City as well.

In some respects, according to Morris, Mexicans seemingly borrowed consciously from their revolutionary neighbors to the north. Mexico and all the Latin American states issued declarations of independence, and the Mexicans—however we may interpret them—put forth several. Of course, French revolutionaries were equally adept at promulgating such documents, but Morris particularly stresses the similarity of the natural rights expressions found in Jefferson's Declaration and Mexico's Act of Independence of 27 September 1821. Morris further contends the American inclination to create written constitutions "proved contagious in Mexico," and he speculates that Mexican "federalism may well have been prompted by the example of the United States."

Morris' observations are assuredly thoughtful and provocative, and he is not unmindful of basic divergences between American and Mexican configurations. Neither Morris nor the other participants, however, tackles what may be the first requirement of the comparative historian: to explain how one defines and measures *influence*. Here there may be considerable disagreement as to the nature of our yardstick, but unfortunately no one actually faces up to the question. Similarities of ideas and institutions do not automatically prove that one society has learned from another. A cluster of attitudes and approaches may be "in the air" in any given time frame. If we have explicit evidence of a notion being deliberately borrowed, then that is influence. If something is created that is demonstrably new, then we have an obligation to probe its origins. In truth, however, our historical training tells us that change is rarely wholly novel or dramatic, but is instead a process characterized by complex interrelated causal factors, not easily quantifiable or systematically understandable as the scientist seeks to understand.

Consequently, it is really a false dichotomy to argue whether the Latin Americans modeled their national structures mainly on North American or French revolutionary precedents. It would be just as ahistorical to debate whether the bricks and mortar of the American state and national governments were copied from English molds, or based on colonial experience, or derived from Americans' reading of classical authors and Enlightenment theorists. Recent scholarship has demolished the claim, once widely accepted, that Americans adopted the concept of separation of powers in the Federal Constitution from Montesquieu's *Spirit of the Laws*. We now recognize that this division of authority, like most features of our revolutionary institutions, stemmed from Anglo-

American ideas and experiences that were fashioned to accommodate the unique needs of the American people between 1776 and 1787.

While it would be chauvinistic and overly simplistic for Americans and Latin Americans to deny an intellectual debt to the Age of Reason, the truth is that each revolutionary movement developed in large part within the context of its own society and its relationship to the parent kingdom in Europe. The words *independence* and *revolution* illustrate the differences between what happened in the United States and Mexico. When Americans, beginning in the spring of 1776, unfurled the language of independence, they meant an absolute and lasting severing of political ties with England. In contrast, the first uprising in Mexico, led by Miguel Hidalgo in 1810, was initially concerned with liberty, but not necessarily with independence. It was, or became, a social movement that appealed powerfully to poor and downtrodden Indians and mestizos. At what point, if ever, Hidalgo sought political independence is debatable. In a provocative essay, Edmundo O'Gorman maintains it was liberty rather than independence that Hidalgo sought for his tattered legions; that Iturbide, on the other hand, later pursued independence without expanding the dimensions of liberty. Accordingly, while liberty and independence traveled hand in hand in America, they followed nonparallel paths in Mexico.

If, among the commentators, Luis Villoro expresses support for O'Gorman's thesis, adding that internally the struggle involved a contest between Creoles and the lower classes, Elías Trabulse counters with the opinion that Hidalgo did favor a completely separate Mexican nation, a view seemingly shared by Ernesto Lemoine. The problem here is with the word "independence." Maria Velázquez observes that the only item of commonality between the opposing sectors of Mexican society was their desire for autonomy. But autonomy does not inevitably mean independence as the American revolutionists used the term. At least this much is clear: autonomy for the Creoles included a preponderance of political power in their hands alone, whereas to Hidalgo and José Morelos it involved authority more broadly shared, with economic and social reform as well. While Hidalgo is known to have spoken of independence, his battle cry was "Long live the king."

For her splendid analysis of this apparent inconsistency, we are much in the debt of Nettie Lee Benson, who explains that in 1810 both in Spain and Mexico there was agitation for independence, and that the word generally meant the same thing on both sides of the Atlantic: Spanish freedom from French domination and the restoration of Ferdinand VII's legitimate throne. "Thus," declares Benson, "it was not a fight for separation from the mother country or independence other than that from foreign domination, namely French. It was a fight of the Mexicans against the usurpers of the Mexican's right to support their King Ferdinand VII in the same way that the Spaniards on the Iberian peninsula rose up to support him. It was, at the same time, a fight for the right of the Mexican to participate in his government."

Let us now examine the word *revolution*. To be sure, American scholars have had their disputes over the significance of what transpired in the thirteen colony-states. And professors sometimes ask their students on examinations the

fundamental question about all such upheavals: "How revolutionary was the American Revolution?" It brought about no radical restructuring of society, but, with the major exception of the slaves from Africa, the vast preponderance of Americans were already remarkably free. Property was held by the many, not the few; most men had the right to vote; and legal privilege—perhaps the greatest single ill in prerevolutionary France—was nonexistent. Still, it was a revolution, and not simply because George III's authority was overthrown and independent governments were established. The Americans eliminated the worst of the old features of political management and created new and innovative ones—separation of church and state, bills of rights, broadly based convention systems, and the first successful federal system of government. Although these concepts were in part Enlightenment ideals, they were first put to the political test in America, where the revolutionists—if inspired by the Age of Reason—nonetheless fashioned them to the realities of their own experience and environment.

Latin American historians have far greater trouble with the concept of revolution as is illustrated by the period 1810–24 in Mexican history. Whatever the goals of Hidalgo and Morelos, it was Iturbide's Creole-led forces that brought about Mexican independence in 1821. It was in fact a war of independence, a phrase that some historians of Mexico favor over the world revolution. In the United States we too refer to our war of independence, but we look on it as only one aspect of something bigger and more important: the American Revolution. In Mexico, the liberal implications of nationhood are not so obvious. While Creoles wished to wrest control from haughty Spanish bureaucrats and monopolists, they also desired more effective means to keep mestizos and mulattoes in their places and to restrain the Indians. To be sure, the Mexican Constitution of 1824 was an enlightened document; we have already noted that Morris believes that its federal features were adopted from the United States. Benson, however, makes a stronger case for Mexican federalism's resting upon Spanish foundations. Mexicans went so far as to take parts of their political instrument almost verbatim from the Spanish constitution of 1812, the latter written by a revolutionary body that included twenty-one Mexican representatives. But, except for the *reforma* of the 1850s, most of nineteenth-century Mexican political history was a dismal refutation of all that parchment stood for.

Hugh M. Hamill, possibly more than any other contributor, gets to the heart of the issue in an essay appropriately entitled, "Was the Mexican Independence Movement a Revolution?" Although the *peninsulares* departed or lost their preferment, Mexico remained a backwater, less than a nation in the modern sense, scarcely more than a collection of incompatible classes and regions—in short, there was no revolution, a term that only muddies the waters of analysis. Rifts in society, if anything, were more glaring, for previously the Spanish crown had functioned as an ameliorating influence, as the hub of a wheel that radiated outward and somehow kept the incompatible groups on or near the rim from tearing each other apart. "With the hub destroyed" by war and independence, "the rim was also fractured into antagonistic pieces," explains Hamill, who asserts that Mexicans had been in the throes of a civil war rather than a revolution.

To a degree one may also speak of a civil war in America between loyalists and patriots. The king's friends, however, were a distinct minority of the total white population. The point to stress, unlike the Mexican struggle, is that among the rebels or insurgents there was no internal bloodletting or counterrevolution; they resolved their sometimes heated controversies within a commonly accepted political process. Hidalgo and Morelos on the "left" and Iturbide on the "right" were put to death by their enemies; George Washington died in his bed.

If the comparison implicitly tells us much about the dissimilar beginnings of the Mexican and American nations, it also indicates why the word "revolution" has been used so differently by the citizens of each. In America, our revolution was a positive event. Both the Federalist John Adams and the Republican Thomas Jefferson could unite in that belief, just as they could prophesy that the liberal sentiments in its great charters would provide a catalyst for continuing reform—for an ongoing American Revolution that some would say has still to run its course. In Mexico "the Revolution" was, and is, a twentieth-century phenomenon; and, to judge from the papers delivered at El Colegio de México, its intellectual and spiritual ties with the age of Hidalgo and Morelos are tenuous at best, although subsequent Mexican leaders after 1824 continued to give lip service to certain stirring occurrences of the independence period—when, for instance, President Porfirio Díaz commemorated the centenary of the Grito de Dolores by ringing the bell that Father Hidalgo had rung so long ago.

This is not to say that all historians have resisted the temptation to trace a continuous linkage from 1810 to 1910, both for liberals and conservatives, much in the same way that Vernon Louis Parrington in the United States sought to do with our history from puritan nonconformism to populism; but, as Beatriz Ruiz Gaitán warns, it is straining the evidence beyond credibility, which was also Parrington's failing.

Given the disparity between the contours of their respective early national histories, it was sensible for the participants at the Mexico City conference to examine later efforts for meaningful reform. Curiously, there is scant mention of Juárez and the years of the reforma in mid-century that resulted in the abolition of the legal privileges (or *fueros*) of elite and professional groups and that stripped the church of its vast land holdings. Perhaps the explanation is found in the fact that the reforma, like independence in 1824, did not usher in a new democratic era, but instead brought the *porfiriato*.

Several authors appear to be saying that for the most part Mexican intellectuals lived comfortably with the long reign of Díaz to 1910. They were interested not in the condition of the peasants who continued to live much as they had in colonial days, who were if anything perhaps worse off in some respects as they were increasingly victimized by the *hacendados*. Not infrequently intellectuals looked to the European ideas of Saint Simon and August Comte rather than to the United States for their inspiration; some even turned back to the preindependence era—to "an ideological defense of the real or imagined corporate society of the past, with the church at its center," writes Charles A. Hale. Still, Mexican thinkers more than not chose to call themselves liberal during the *porfiriato* since "liberalism became equated with the nation, conservatism with

treason." But it was "scientific liberalism" of ordered, bureaucratic progress, of businesslike administration and encouragement to foreign capital investments. In all of this the church upheld the status quo, whereas, to paraphrase Juan Ortega y Medina, evangelical protestantism in America was a potent springboard for giving literal application to the humanitarian provisions of the Declaration of Independence.

Where then are the roots of the twentieth-century Mexican Revolution, and what was its nature? It began modestly. From 1910 to 1913, much like Americans prior to 1776, Mexicans appealed mainly "for a revival of respect for the Constitution," states John Womack. By 1914 at Torreón the thrust was for "new" rights for the previously "disinherited," the workers and *campesinos*. These developments generated problems and adjustments for Mexican liberalism. Liberals of the porfiriato had gloried in the rights of private property, which were nurtured by the state under Díaz; after 1910 some, although not all, became advocates of an activist government that showed concern for the welfare of the masses. Landowners should share the yields of their acres with the peasants, or else their estates should be expropriated. In treating liberal concerns Alvaro Matute and Eugenia Meyer are not always of one mind on the relationship between liberalism and the early years of the revolution; Meyer believes that liberals adjusted to the new day in Mexican history more easily than does Matute.

In any case, neither would deny the growing importance of land in the revolutionary lexicon. The story of land—who owned it and what happened to it—is as revealing as any subject to dramatize the chasm separating the revolutionary histories of the two hemispheric neighbors. In the English North American colonies, land was widely held by people at almost all levels of free society. To Jefferson, the typical eighteenth-century American citizen was a rural freeholder; possessed of a stake in society, he was a voter, a participant in the political process whose wishes could scarcely be ignored by his representative in the constituent assembly of his state. Indeed, in her splendid *On Revolution*, Hannah Arendt goes so far as to claim that what captivated the have-nots of the world about the American scene of two hundred years ago was not the American Revolution per se but the freedom that the English colonists had achieved before 1776, particularly to be the masters of their economic destiny, to live in relative ease on their own farms and escape the ravages of hunger.

Whereas the presence of almost inexhaustible quantities of "free land" became for historian Frederick Jackson Turner a kind of dynamic that held the key to American democratic progress, the course of land reform has been for many Mexicans a barometer of the success of their recent revolution. The revolutionists of 1910 such as Francisco Madero and Emiliano Zapata were at odds as to the priorities for taking on the hacendados and their allies. Serious redistribution did not commence until the administration of President Lázaro Cárdenas in the 1930s, nor was it substantially followed up until the presidency of Adolfo López Mateos two decades later, and even then there were and continue to be charges that the land is in part nonarable and that the cooperative system of the *ejidos* is inefficient. Critics in and out of Mexico have complained that the current stress on industrial growth, of overhauling the business infrastructure, has resulted in an inadequate "trickle down" theory of benefits for the overall popula-

tion. The heavy influx of American investments has even triggered the cry of a return to the porfiriato. To the charge that the revolution has been betrayed or subverted, it might be fair to counter with a recital of what some observers see as impressive gains, not the least of which are in education and the judicial processes.

All of which brings one to inquire if the term "revolution" has outlived its usefulness, especially when everything is measured in terms of whether or not it fits into what is a relative, imprecise concept—that of revolution. Whatever the revolution was at some point in time, is it now a myth? To John Womack, who compares how Americans have employed the heritage of their eighteenth-century revolution with how Mexicans have done the same with their post-1910 movement, the results are dismal if not tragic for both nations. In both, rhetoric has exceeded accomplishment.

Of course he is correct, in some measure at any rate. The higher men's aspirations the more difficult it becomes to live consistently with their principles. Both revolutions are additionally the stuff of myths because such is the way of all movements filled with drama, pathos, ideals, and heroic figures. That is why, in the opinion of Marcus Cunliffe, it is impossible to get at the "real" George Washington; the layers of fact and fiction are now inseparable. Nor is Washington alone—Zapata is another, of whom Womack has given us a fine biography. Or to return to United States history, we have myths about Lincoln, not Pierce; about Wilson, not Coolidge.

If Womack is too severe in his treatment of both revolutionary mythologies, he nonetheless hits the nail on the head in saying that special interests have sought to exploit those traditions, to cloak their designs, and to manipulate the public in the name of hallowed symbols and personalities. Still, his pessimism seems excessive, as Stanley Ross points out in his commentary. For much that is sound and rightfully enduring has come from those traditions, although numerous unsolved domestic problems remain to be dealt with by both nations; and this writer for one is skeptical of Womack's assertion that Americans have wrapped almost everything but the kitchen sink in the mantle of acting out a cherished revolutionary past, particularly when he includes Reconstruction, Free Silver, and Black Power.

As for American foreign policy, Womack is on sounder ground. Despite repeated efforts, we have failed to sell the American Revolution as a commodity for export—to box it like cornflakes, as Ross puts it. As Simón Bolívar advised his fellow revolutionists, the United States experience could inspire men everywhere, but that did not mean American institutions would work for Latin America, a warning that has escaped our own statesmen from Theodore Roosevelt's day to Richard Nixon's. Quite likely Latin Americans have found our economic penetration just as offensive as our political meddling since the two have usually gone hand in hand, reinforcing each other so completely that they can hardly be disentangled. This spreading of the "American way" has been interpreted as a less than subtle scheme to help ourselves at the expense of others, rather than as a program to elevate our friends for their own welfare. One hopes that the United States has learned something from the painful hap-

penings in Chile and from our disaster in Vietnam. If we have something to offer the world, out of our past and our present, then surely there are better ways of sharing it with people *who want it*.

There may be a caveat here for those who feel the Mexican Revolution is today more relevant than the American Revolution; that its so-called democratic socialism makes it a “preferred” revolution, also preferable to the form of Marxist revolution that occurred in Cuba—in short, a model for the Third World of backward, have-not peoples. At this point we Americans, from sad personal experience, may hold up a warning finger, mindful of how we have used and abused comparative history.

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