

RECENT ECONOMIC AND REGIONAL HISTORIES OF THE MEXICAN REVOLUTION

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INDUSTRY AND UNDERDEVELOPMENT: THE INDUSTRIALIZATION OF MEXICO, 1890–1940. By Stephen H. Haber. (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1989. Pp. 237. \$35.00 cloth.)

OIL AND REVOLUTION IN MEXICO. By Jonathan C. Brown. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993. Pp. 453. \$40.00 cloth.)

THE MEXICAN REVOLUTION AND THE LIMITS OF AGRARIAN REFORM, 1915–1946. By Dana Markiewicz. (Boulder, Colo.: Lynn Rienner, 1993. Pp. 215. \$37.50 cloth.)

PROVINCES OF THE REVOLUTION: ESSAYS ON MEXICAN REGIONAL HISTORY, 1910–1929. Edited by Thomas Benjamin and Mark Wasserman. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1990. Pp. 390. \$19.95 paper.)

MEXICO'S REGIONS: COMPARATIVE HISTORY AND DEVELOPMENT. Edited by Eric Van Young. (La Jolla: Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies, University of California, San Diego, 1992. Pp. 257. \$16.95 paper.)

Continuing interest in detailed studies of the Mexican Revolution of 1910 has been sparked by the ongoing historiographical debate between the revisionists, who believe that the revolution resulted in little more than a transfer of power from one elite group to another, and the antirevisionists, who claim that meaningful social change occurred during the so-called decade of violence (from 1910 to 1919). The five books reviewed in this essay do not resolve the debate definitively one way or the other, but they shed some additional wattage on it. At the least, these studies contribute to the trend (by now an avalanche) of monographs that have shifted their focus of attention from national studies to the various regions, thereby lending even more substance to the argument that only by knowing what happened at the local level can historians reach a fuller understanding of the national picture.

The two contrasting interpretations of the revolution may in part reflect on the contemporaneous perceptions of the participants. Revisionists have essentially adopted the point of view of rural outsiders and

populists that all the national politicians looked identical and were equally untrustworthy. In this sense, Emiliano Zapata thought like a revisionist. When he and Pancho Villa discussed the state of affairs during their conference at Xochimilco in December 1914, two of the few subjects they could agree on or even converse about were national political figures Victoriano Huerta and Venustiano Carranza. "They're all a bunch of bastards," Zapata reportedly declared. Conversely, few of the national politicians, at least in the early years of the revolution, seemed to appreciate the regional distinctions that required varied solutions to Mexico's ills. Like Carranza and his proconsuls, the national politicians tended to try to impose their particular solutions nationwide. Only with the ascension of Alvaro Obregón in 1920 did a leader emerge who seemed sensitive to local interests. Perhaps the whirlwind of motion, which Carlos Fuentes found so essential to the phenomenon of revolution in *The Old Gringo*, was in part responsible for Obregón's and his generation's increased awareness of regional differences.¹

Historians will fight further skirmishes in this ongoing historiographical battle as they continue to explore the social, political, and particularly the economic changes wrought by the revolution, as John Womack challenged the profession to do in the late 1970s.² The three economic histories reviewed in this essay leave the growing impression that the Mexican Revolution represented more continuity than change and did not radically transform economic practices inherited from Porfirio Díaz. The two regional collections, in contrast, reinforce Leslie Byrd Simpson's truism about the prevalence of "many Mexicos" even in the modern age. In doing so, they lend credence to the antirevisionist view that social change did occur in some provinces. Whether regionalism will continue to represent a determining force in contemporary Mexico remains uncertain, but in any event, these two collections emphasize its validity as an approach in studying the country at least through 1938.

The Economic Histories

Two of the works discussed here examine major policy issues facing twentieth-century Mexico: the question of industrialization and its impact on the Porfirian and revolutionary state; and the role of agrarian reform and change in the rural sector. The third economic history examines the petroleum industry from 1880 to 1920, when foreigners dominated it outside the purview of the national state. Each of the three authors suggests that contemporary Mexico's economic problems, most

1. Carlos Fuentes, *The Old Gringo*, translated by Margaret Sayers Peden (New York: Harper and Row, 1985), 102, 128.

2. John Womack, "The Mexican Economy during the Revolution, 1910–1920: Historiography and Analysis," *Marxist Perspectives* 1, no. 4 (1978):80–123.

obviously manifested in the crises of the 1980s, are rooted not in the post-1940 period of the institutionalized revolution but rather in the Porfirian past. In forwarding this hypothesis, each author questions the traditional view that the year 1940 marked a major watershed in Mexican development, dividing the age of the fits and starts of implementing the social program mandated in the Constitution of 1917 from the era of political institutionalization and economic growth. In emphasizing the continuity of Porfirian goals in the revolutionary period, the overall impression made by these works is that little has changed in the broad run of Mexican history.

Stephen Haber's superb *Industry and Underdevelopment: The Industrialization of Mexico, 1890–1940* makes the intriguing argument that the patterns governing industrial policies in contemporary Mexico stem not from the social restructuring that allegedly occurred as a result of the revolution or from the opportunities provided by World War II for import substitution but rather from the policies and practices of the Porfiriato. Haber thus bolsters the revisionist claim that the Mexican Revolution represented a shift in focus rather than a major social upheaval. Even during the Porfiriato, Mexican industrialists, protected behind high tariff walls, were concentrating on import substitution because inefficiencies in the manufacturing process and the labor force as well as the scarcity of capital meant that Mexican enterprises could not compete in the free international marketplace. Thus emerging Mexican industrialists responded positively to Díaz's centralizing policies and his transportation revolution by creating oligopolistic enterprises in limited sectors like textiles, leather-making, cement, steel manufacturing, and beer brewing. Peasants, no longer tied to the modernizing estates, were for better or worse dispersed into the urban areas to form the new industrial proletariat in the Mexican version of the enclosure movement. With the economic conditions of workers improving until the 1890s, both laborers and the growing middle class provided a new internal market for Mexican industrial goods. But overall, Mexican industry suffered from inefficiencies arising from the overcapacity of plants and underconsumption of products, just as it does now. The result required formation of vertically integrated regional monopolies to garner even the smallest of profit margins. Shortages of capital and the high costs of entry into manufacturing led to industry becoming dominated by twenty-five merchant families, many of them foreign in origin. During the Porfiriato, these families enjoyed political influence that feathered their economic nests. Capital investment took place primarily because these families anticipated (but rarely realized) long-term profits.

The violent stage of the revolution inevitably chilled the investment climate. Haber concurs with the thesis of Womack's article that the revolution did not destroy industry. According to Haber, the same oligop-

olies and economic structures survived the decade of violence. Depression damaged the industrial sector significantly between 1914 and 1916, when the fiercest fighting took place, but was followed by a quick economic recovery as Venustiano Carranza began to pacify the country. The revolution did alter one factor in the industrial equation in that labor now played an important political role. Industrial growth slowed in the 1920s, according to Haber, because the industrialists feared continuing instability. He argues convincingly that capital felt insecure because of cuts in government spending and internal unrest. Thus the Mexican depression began early and ended by 1932.

Perhaps Haber's most interesting argument is that the revival of the modern Mexican industrial state occurred during the Cárdenas era, not in the Calles period, echoing comments made by Frank Brandenburg decades ago.³ Conventional wisdom would hold that capitalists would shy away from investing in enterprises in a state where nationalization of industries and huge pay hikes for workers were routine. Haber argues instead that Cárdenas's policy of deficit spending on constructing public works, especially the highway network, actually encouraged capitalists to invest. Scholars might also consider the possibility that the nationalization of foreign-held enterprises created a positive internal investment climate, that is to say, eliminating competition from the field may have stimulated domestic investors. In any event, Haber concludes that the renewed profits from these two or three years of modest growth were sufficient to encourage capital reinvestment by Sanford Mosk's "New Group" and others, leaving Mexico poised for the profits resulting from import substitution, profits that were realizable because of World War II. Haber's *Industry and Underdevelopment* thus sets the stage for further research on the 1930s.

Jonathan Brown's study of the petroleum industry in Mexico during its formative years, *Oil and Revolution in Mexico*, also demonstrates the considerable continuity in this industry between the Porfirian and the revolutionary periods. Because foreigners dominated the oil business to the virtual exclusion of Mexicans, Brown's study invites comparison with Haber's. In examining the petroleum industry from its inception through the boom years until 1920, Brown fills an immense void in the secondary literature and lays the groundwork for a second volume detailing the expropriation in 1938 and creation of the national petroleum corporation, PEMEX.

Brown traces intriguingly the early rivalry between U.S. oil prospector Edward Doheny and British engineer and oil entrepreneur Weetman Pearson (later Lord Cowdray) as they attempted to monopolize the oil fields in the Huasteca region. But just when the reader fears becoming

3. Frank Brandenburg, *The Making of Modern Mexico* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1964).

immersed in an oil company history, Brown returns to the milieu of the Mexican Revolution and astutely places his study within the national and regional contexts. Because the federal government's power to enforce peace dwindled to near nothing during the decade of violence, the oil companies faced a bewildering series of exactions from different factions in the region. Yet despite frequent robberies and threats against foreigners, oil profits burgeoned. Wildcatters and the major corporations purchased property from local landholders, and production on the three principal oil fields (including the world's most productive at El Aguila's Potrero del Llano) boomed. Essentially, Brown argues that the weakness of the revolutionary state prohibited Huerta and Carranza from implementing economic nationalism, whereas Díaz and Francisco Madero were loath to do so as a matter of choice. Carranza laid the bureaucratic foundations for regulating the industry, but the presence of anti-Carrancista forces in the Huasteca limited his ability to implement the policy. Despite verbal hostilities, Mexicans in the oil region generally treated U.S. workers well except during the Veracruz occupation and the Pershing punitive expedition when the United States invaded Mexico. Brown thus contradicts a recent study that found hostility toward U.S. capitalists and citizens living in Mexico to be an operative force in the Mexican Revolution.⁴

One of the most interesting tales Brown weaves revolves around the life and times of Manuel Peláez, a local landlord who controlled the Huasteca region and fought for several years against the Carranza regime. Although standard interpretations have usually described Peláez as a "reactionary" and a tool of the oil companies, Brown discredits both these views. Peláez actually extorted monies from the oil companies, which they contributed unwillingly. Further, Peláez had few real links to bona fide conservatives like Felix Díaz. Peláez's revolt was motivated instead by Carranza's intrusions into his local domain. Like many other landlord rebels throughout Mexico, Peláez fought to keep his region free of outsiders. But in the long run, Carranza's national army proved too strong, and at the end of the decade, the bureaucrats and regulators invaded in earnest. Carranza's economic nationalism—as part of the reinvigorated national state's determination to seize control of the rebellious regions, their strongmen, and their resources—eventually triumphed, arousing concerns about confiscation among the oil barons and the Republican leadership in the U.S. Congress. Despite Senator Albert Bacon Fall's valiant attempts, the oil companies and other political supporters in the U.S. Congress failed to discredit Woodrow Wilson's foreign policy favoring Carranza. Moreover, Fall's activist stance soon proved unnecess-

4. John Hart, *Revolutionary Mexico: The Coming and Process of the Mexican Revolution* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987).

ary because Obregón and his new regime after 1920 were willing enough to compromise due to domestic challenges.

Brown's *Oil and Revolution in Mexico* also enriches scholarly understanding of the role of labor in the revolution. Although Mexican labor never played a major role in the fighting, Carranza enjoyed even less success in recruiting supporters in the oil fields than elsewhere among workers. This phenomenon can be explained in part by Peláez's local popularity. Even more significantly, as Brown argues, full employment seemed a healthy alternative to the insecurities of the battlefield, especially as the economics of supply and demand kept oil workers' wages high during the latter years of the revolution. Further, the companies tried to make their workers happy in paternalistic ways, as in selling foodstuffs below cost and providing free schools and hospitals. Given the loss of jobs between 1905 and 1910, workers in other parts of Mexico were often motivated to join the revolution because they lacked suitable employment opportunities at home. Thus regarding labor, interesting parallels exist between oil workers and laborers on at least one rubber plantation in Chiapas. A noticeable difference between the Huasteca situation and southern Chiapas, however, was that the presence of more foreign workers who were being paid higher wages than their Mexican counterparts created more resentment against foreigners in the Huasteca area. The oil companies' discrimination caused these skilled laborers to become the cudgel with which the national administration would hammer the oil companies in the late 1920s. As a result, oil workers improved their status in a rather traditional Mexican way: by using their influence on national government as a pressure group, just as they were to do in the labor dispute of 1936.

Finally, Brown's and Haber's studies are to be commended for the refreshing absence of the warmed-over dependency arguments that have obfuscated so many earlier attempts at economic history. Both Haber and Brown explain the presence of powerful outside economic interests without reducing the issue to a formula. Thus both monographs qualify as the kind of well-written and informative books on economic history that John Womack urged historians to produce.

Far less successful is Dana Markiewicz's Marxist interpretation of agrarian reform policy, *The Mexican Revolution and the Limits of Agrarian Reform, 1915–1946*. In general, she fails to resuscitate a moribund theory of causation and, to make matters worse, is often imprisoned intellectually by its rhetoric. Her analysis leads to numerous oversimplifications. As Alan Knight has demonstrated, analysis of class conflict cannot adequately explain the complexities of the decade of violence, and Markiewicz's efforts fare no better than earlier attempts.⁵

5. Alan Knight, *The Mexican Revolution*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

For Markiewicz, the “Bonapartist state” of the 1920s cynically deceived Mexican peasants into accepting token land reform as a means of heading off the true social revolution for which Villa and Zapata had struggled. Thus the Bonapartists successfully preserved the capitalistic nature of Mexican society, a mistake in Markiewicz’s opinion. Markiewicz is further disturbed by the agrarian reformers’ decision to favor individual plots within an *ejido* rather than genuine collectivist agriculture. She contends that the government purposefully subverted collectivism in the few instances when it appeared by refusing to grant loans and provide adequate water resources to collectives. The federal government consistently squelched local attempts to create collectives, such as those begun under Adalberto Tejada in Veracruz. For Markiewicz, this cynical betrayal continued with only temporary and mostly insignificant improvement under Lázaro Cárdenas. In her view, his primary purpose in promoting agrarian reform was regime consolidation, evidenced by the incorporation of the peasants as one of the sectors of the Partido de la Revolución Mexicana (PRM). Thus the capitalist state preempted agrarian reform purely because the regime wanted the *ejidatarios* to labor on neighboring haciendas. This view ignores the possibility (and the probable reality) that the revolutionary leadership and the peasants themselves actually believed that redistribution of land in a capitalistic system was in the peasants’ best interest. For Markiewicz, only the creation of collectivized agriculture would have constituted a genuine social revolution. In creating her model, she conveniently ignores the complete failure of simultaneous collectivization in the Soviet Union, assuming without justification that the scheme would have succeeded in Mexico. Most critically, Markiewicz presumes that all Mexican peasants wanted collectivized agriculture in the first place, thereby ignoring regional variations. Most analysts would submit that the peasantry’s long admiration of “Tata” Cárdenas provides convincing proof to the contrary. This author’s assumptions are patronizing at best.

Yet despite its Marxist jargon, *The Mexican Revolution and the Limits of Agrarian Reform* makes some salient points. Agrarian reform was indeed partly political, although perhaps not to the degree Markiewicz suggests. Her analysis of the “Maximato,” the three interim presidents who served before Cárdenas in the wake of Obregón’s assassination, emphasizes important differences among the policies of the three leaders and points out the need for further study of this period. Markiewicz also asserts that the shift away from massive land redistribution began in 1938 during the Cárdenas administration, not after it, as some writers have suggested. But as forthcoming research is published on the Cárdenas period, historians can expect more persuasive explanations for the change in Cárdenas’s agrarian policy than the thesis that the co-optation of the peasantry succeeded and therefore no need existed to continue the reform.

Regional Histories

Ever since Lesley Simpson coined the phrase “many Mexicos” a half-century ago, historians have been sensitized to the rich mosaic of regional patterns characterizing the country from Chihuahua to Chiapas. Most notably, with the pioneering studies of the 1960s (and arguably even before in some Mexican circles), the historiography has focused on the Mexican Revolution as a regional experience. Depending on whether the dramatic actor was a campesino or a ranchero from Morelos, Chiapas, or Chihuahua, the revolution played out its drama in a multitude of ways that depended on local conditions and circumstances. As a result of historians’ recognition of the importance of the regional phenomenon, each Mexican state has had its story written separately, although not always definitively. The work of regional historians has engendered several recent national syntheses of the revolution that have spotlighted the debate between the revisionists and the antirevisionists. In further defining and elaborating the role of regions in Mexican history, two volumes under review here extend the discussion to new chronological boundaries, into the 1920s. Taken as a whole, these essays demonstrate that a regional examination of the revolution strengthens the antirevisionist interpretation that social change did occur, at least temporarily, during the decade of violence and the 1920s.

One of the main themes emerging from Thomas Benjamin and Mark Wasserman’s *Essays on Mexican Regional History, 1910–1929* is that the Mexican Revolution interrupted the creation of a centralized nation-state for at least two decades. In so doing, the revolution provided new directions for that state, enfranchising the popular classes to some degree. Six of the essays in this tightly woven collection emphasize the regional nature of the revolution by telling the story of specific states, while the other six discuss more general topics. When they are considered as a whole, the reader gains a fuller understanding of the variety of concerns and causes in the national struggle as well as the regional variations. The collection concludes with Benjamin’s excellent review of the historical literature on the revolution and its regions.

The first segment of *Essays on Mexican Regional History* divides the period chronologically and establishes a conceptual overview. Because my own research interests coincide with David LaFrance’s topic here, I found his essay the most provocative. Arguing that the twin problems of U.S. capitalist penetration and attempted political centralization led to the Madero Revolution of 1910, LaFrance traces the movement in two key regions, the northwest and the center. As he points out, the rural portions of these regions often had their own agenda and were only nominally loyal to Madero. LaFrance goes on to catalog Madero’s “mistakes,” arguing that his failure to support the rural populists’ reform programs led to

his downfall. Looking at the problem from a slightly different perspective, one could argue instead that Madero's presidency expressed the logical culmination of his own beliefs and values. Thus he had no logical alternative but to support the civilian Maderista and the anti-*científico* Porfirian politicians who believed in the importance of maintaining continuity with the past via moderate rather than radical programs of social reform. Allen Wells and Gilbert Joseph's contribution on the Yucatán lends further credence to this viewpoint in demonstrating that José María Pino Suárez, the leading Maderista in Yucatán, basically followed Porfirian governing practices during his brief tenure as the state's chief executive. John Tutino's fine essay contrasts the Zapatista and Villista movements between 1913 and 1917, the period when he believes they had the greatest prospects for creating a peasant revolution. Benjamin's essay on the 1920s highlights an essential contradiction emerging from the recent research. Although the traditional historiography posited a seamless transition from the Constitution of 1917 to the creation of the modern national state, Benjamin points out that both Obregón and Plutarco Elías Calles had to make frequent accommodations to powerful regional caudillos. The national state did not really emerge until Cárdenas restructured the PRM in the late 1930s.

The longest section of *Essays on Mexican Regional History* describes the course taken by the revolution in six states: Oaxaca, San Luis Potosí, Yucatán, Tamaulipas, Chihuahua, and Tlaxcala. This research highlights the regional variety of the revolution. Some states (like Oaxaca) resisted the Carranza invasion for local reasons, while others embraced it. These essays also underscore the futility of applying national labels (Carrancista, Villista, Zapatista, Felicista) to these regional revolts. A similar point should be made about the epithet "reactionary," which as traditionally employed in the documents and the literature usually lacks a meaningful definition. Like the other ascriptions, it has served as a convenient political label to describe anyone—regardless of beliefs, values, and ideology—who opposed the writer's political viewpoint. The term originated during the Madero elections but became commonplace at the end of the decade, when Carranza used it as political propaganda to describe movements as different as Zapatismo and Felicismo.

Some of the newest work in this volume examines local history in the 1920s, a period that has recently generated more interest. Again, because the federal government lacked coercive power and had not yet fully achieved consensus among the various contending interest groups looking for solutions to their demands, the national governments of the 1920s had to make peace with various regional strongmen who enjoyed enough autonomy to conduct experiments in social reform. Yucatán experimented with socialism, while Tamaulipas adopted agrarian reform measures to further the political ambitions of Emilio Portes Gil. These

“state laboratories” led to the institutionalization of the revolution in the 1940s, as is argued in several of the essays, because they politicized popular issues and provided direction for populist leaders and programs on the national level.

Far more ambitious in scope, if less successful in execution, is a collection of essays called *Mexico's Regions: Comparative History and Development*. Eric Van Young cleverly edited essays from different social science disciplines, different perspectives, and time frames. He tried mightily to provide an intellectual framework, even mastering the jargon from several “human science” disciplines, but in the end, the quest for definitional exactness and fine theoretical distinctions suffocates the reader’s patience. The essays become involved in exactly the sort of disputation that gave scholasticism a bad name centuries ago. One contributor even has the audacity to applaud the new vocabulary he has invented that enables him to revamp concepts that he “shares in common with other formulations” (p. 86). Efforts like this lend credibility to public perceptions that the academy has retreated into its ivory tower, having nothing relevant or informative to say to nonacademics. If Mexicanists from different disciplines cannot communicate with each other effectively, then certainly general readers will have no access to the questions that academicians are pursuing.

Yet some of the essays contained in *Mexico's Regions* can be perused with great profit. Certainly the most readable is Paul Vanderwood’s preliminary findings on three revolts that stirred the region called “the Papigochic” in western Chihuahua during the late Porfiriato. In the Guerrero district, later called the “cradle of the revolution,” Vanderwood finds a historical region where rebellions have flourished. He cautiously hazards the thesis that a tradition of political protest and moral concerns could explain the district’s propensity for rebelliousness. Further, he analyzes with clarity the Tomochic revolt of 1891–1892 and the role played by certain nuclear families in the rebellion. Essays by Manuel Carlos and Guillermo de la Peña analyze regional power brokers and the competitive leadership system in contemporary Mexico that assures constituents some degree of responsiveness in their regional leadership. Most of the other contributions look at definitional questions, examining different ways to conceptualize regions, both temporally and spatially. All the essayists agree that regionalism is not a static concept and that the borders of regions can ebb and flow with changing economic, political, and social circumstances. The editor asks the rhetorical question, “Are Regions Good to Think?” This reader’s answer would be no, at least not as they are conceptualized and discussed in this collection.

Conclusion

Each of the volumes under review contributes in some way to expanding knowledge about Mexico. The volumes on regional history are gratifying because they extend discussions into the 1920s. The argument made in several of the essays that the 1920s was also a historical period when Mexico's regional diversity made a difference seems logical given the relative weakness of the national government. Scholars will undoubtedly push their research into the 1930s, much as Dudley Ankersen has already done for San Luis Potosí.⁶ Particularly gratifying are the two new monographs on the economic history of the early revolution. Although they lend much evidence to the revisionists' argument that the more things change, the more they remain the same, Haber's and Brown's scholarship is remarkable and their conclusions are logical. I look forward to further volumes on the many Mexicos as well as on the economy as historians continue to sort out the nature of the Mexican Revolution.

6. Dudley Ankersen, *Agrarian Warlord: Saturnino Cedillo and the Mexican Revolution in San Luis Potosí* (De Kalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1984).