

# HISTORIOGRAPHICAL DYNAMICS OF THE MEXICAN REVOLUTION

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*FÉLIX DÍAZ, THE PORFIRIANS, AND THE MEXICAN REVOLUTION.* By PETER V. N. HENDERSON. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1981. Pp. 239. \$18.50.)

*ÁLVARO OBREGÓN: POWER AND REVOLUTION IN MEXICO, 1911-1920.* By LINDA B. HALL. (College Station: Texas A and M University Press, 1981. Pp. 290. \$22.50.)

*CAUDILLO AND PEASANT IN THE MEXICAN REVOLUTION.* By DAVID BRADING. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1980. Pp. 311. \$41.50.)

*EMILIANO ZAPATA Y EL MOVIMIENTO ZAPATISTA: CINCO ENSAYOS.* By the INSTITUTO NACIONAL DE ANTROPOLOGÍA E HISTORIA. (Mexico City: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 1980. Pp. 381.)

*RANCHERO REVOLT: THE MEXICAN REVOLUTION IN GUERRERO.* By IAN JACOBS. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983. Pp. 234. \$25.00.)

*THE MEXICAN REVOLUTION: AN ANNOTATED GUIDE TO RECENT SCHOLARSHIP.* By W. DIRK RAAT. (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1982. Pp. 275. \$39.95.)

These six books reflect the long-term development of Mexican historical studies, including traditional biography, innovative field work, regional history, and revisionism. They all treat the Mexican Revolution, but none of them discusses its causes. To provide for the nonspecialist a context for the events treated by these studies, a brief background summary of conditions and trends prior to the outbreak of fighting is in order.

The revolution came about as part of a worldwide wave of nationalistic political unrest, which reflected socioeconomic crisis in the early twentieth century and incorporated seemingly unlikely revolutionaries from the rural upper and middle classes in Mexico, China, Iran, and Russia between 1905 and 1910. Our understanding of the economic forces involved in Mexican unrest at the turn of the century remains deficient, but it can be said that the revolution emerged from the failure of the Porfirian regime to maintain the growth of political participation and social benefits from what had been a dynamic and expansive industrial-commercial economy during its first twenty-five years.

The regime had made an impressive start on what Western capitalist ideologues call “modernization.” Mines and agriculture flourished. A new class of middle-sized landholders, or ranchers, emerged. These rancheros, who command attention from three of the books under review here, numbered about forty-five thousand in 1910. They took their place alongside the hacendados as important members of the local and regional elites. The growing economy that spawned them began with an emphasis on the development of essential banking, transportation, and communications infrastructure. But in the long term, the economic expansion resulted in a predominance of export-oriented, foreign-controlled mining and commercial agriculture enclaves. As with so many societies in the process of rapid industrialization in the twentieth century, a corollary of gaining access to outside capital was to accept foreign domination of the new enterprises with a concomitant failure to integrate production with domestic consumption.

The Díaz regime failed to establish controls on foreigners. It also failed to create a self-sustaining economy capable of guaranteeing social stability in the face of worldwide sugar overproduction, steady silver devaluation, and shortfalls of new investment that accompanied the recurring financial crisis of the North Atlantic investing powers. Instead of developing internal markets, the regime allowed the creation of an imbalanced economy that was overly committed to the export of silver and raw materials as the basis for a favorable balance of payments and the attraction of foreign investment. Between 1907 and 1910, the failure of that strategy led to the emergency importation of \$35,000,000 pesos worth of corn to alleviate rising famine.<sup>1</sup>

Even while the late-nineteenth-century economic boom was underway, regional and local elites from the Maderos to the ranchers noted with growing nationalistic scorn the growing power of government officials and their links with what are now called multinational companies. Mexican intellectuals attempted to express the anguish of the regional elites, rancheros, peasants, and industrial workers with poignant descriptions of political tyranny and broken lives in newspaper articles, novels, and poetry. But the carping of the 1890s soon gave way to revolutionary violence. The process was driven by an external and internal economic crisis that caused devaluation in 1905 and temporarily dried up foreign investments in 1907–8. Many of the concerns that closed their doors were owned by Mexican elites in the provinces, including the Maderos. Those who suffered most from the higher prices of imported goods were the erstwhile prosperous middle sectors.<sup>2</sup>

Ambitious men who long had chafed at the unwanted competition of foreigners and their own political exclusion now blamed the government for their economic woes. The growing rural middle stratum of rancheros and the trained personnel of the towns, who expected so

much from the government, found their new well-being and social prestige in jeopardy. They lacked political representation. The obsolete political system was too narrow to accommodate the more diverse society that economic growth had created. The affected classes adopted varieties of anarchism, nationalism, and an updated social liberalism to explain their grievances and to justify their revolutions.

The 1910 presidential candidate, Francisco Madero, took a major step toward breaking down caste differentiation when he used a now-innocent-sounding slogan that meant “one man—one vote, down with boss rule” in his campaign. Industrial workers of all types, small-scale farmers, and a cross-section of small businessmen and regional elites rallied to his banner. Madero’s new freedom offered a vindication of the Liberal past of centrist and dictatorial government, the right for workers to organize, and legal redress for peasants who had suffered from illegal land expropriation in the enclosure process. He brought the dissenters together in a revolutionary amalgam that toppled the Díaz regime in the spring of 1911.

In retrospect, it is easy to underestimate Félix Díaz and his Felicista movement as a tragicomic effort to restore to power an already discredited regime and its vested interests. Peter Henderson manages to escape that pitfall in a careful biography of the man and the story of his failure, *Félix Díaz, the Porfirians, and the Mexican Revolution*. Díaz was not a man on the periphery of events, but a figure representative of the surviving Porfirian elite. Henderson’s view reinforces other findings that Díaz’s potential was carefully examined by the Americans before they ambivalently settled on Venustiano Carranza. Henderson’s biography identifies the personal and symbolic shortcomings that contributed to Díaz’s and the Porfirians’ failure: he was naive and out of contact with events, lacked political acumen, and even harbored “irrational fears” that Huerta might murder him. This belief that Huerta threatened his well-being does not seem overly irrational to me, but there is more to the story.

The sweep of events removed Díaz and his Porfirian brethren from center stage. He lost Oaxaca to Maderista revolutionaries, although the situation was already hopeless by the time that he received the gubernatorial appointment there. Huerta controlled most of the military forces after Madero’s assassination; consequently, Díaz had no means with which to challenge him effectively. Carranza quickly gained the support of most northern elites, with their ready access to American arms that were being smuggled and openly passed across the border, causing Díaz to lose even Matamoros, a site his supporters had controlled for most of the Madero era.

As a biography, Henderson’s study is a traditional, narrowly focused work. In the wider sweep of the revolution, it would be helpful to know about his supporters. What was the Felicista social base? One can

guess that it comprised local appointees of the ancien régime, soldiery, and some Porfirian businessmen. Did it include rancheros? The author fails to address these questions. Instead, he concludes that by 1920, "a new elite had emerged . . . to replace the Porfirian. A new . . . coalition now controlled the destiny of the nation."

The nature of that new coalition has stimulated renewed interest among historians in the winning figures. Perhaps the ultimate individual winner was Álvaro Obregón Salido, an aspiring commercial farmer who had been marginalized socially from his mother's elite Sonoran lineage through her economically unfruitful marriage and the death of his father. After the violence subsided, Obregón quickly consolidated control over a latifundia complex that remains the largest in Sonora and then presided over a military alliance that toppled Carranza from power. Together with P. Elias Calles, another marginal family member of the Sonoran oligarchy, Obregón then created the political machine that has ruled Mexico ever since.

The rise to power of Obregón and his regional elite and middle-stratum backers coincided with the "institutionalization" of the Mexican Revolution. Between 1915 and 1920, Obregón rose from the military commander whose forces defeated Francisco Villa's División del Norte to become leader of a diverse political amalgam. That alliance included provincial elites and pequeña burguesía made up of rural rancheros and town and city shopkeepers as well as subordinate formations of workers and peasants. The study of Obregón raises the question of how "revolutionary" was this revolution? Was Obregón revolutionary? How did his goals and aspirations compare with those of participating social groups? Did he characterize the rancheros, whose role is generating a new genre of revolutionary history? Why did he accept Carranza as his leader if he had sympathy for mass aspirations?

Linda Hall begins her *Álvaro Obregón: Power and Revolution in Mexico* with his Sonoran participation in the suppression of the anti-government populist uprising led by Pascual Orozco in 1911. She then carries the story forward to his successful claim to the presidency in 1920. With biographic thoroughness and a sense of balance, the author narrates events and synthesizes a wide range of sources. The work provides a useful individualized focus on Obregón and his role in affairs, an illuminating aspect of an otherwise often-told story. The author captures Obregón's attractive personality as well as his flexibility. He undoubtedly reassured, charmed, and even inspired those around him. One is left with little doubt that discerning officials, aspiring bureaucrats, and other "revolutionary" leaders viewed Obregón as a winner.

The contrasting rude roots of Emiliano Zapata and Pancho Villa and their generally narrower horizons made them less acceptable to educated "middle sectors" who were following their self-interests. Obregón

had the decisiveness they sought. He also possessed political acumen that fostered successful business relations with American enterprises in Sonora and his own developing ventures before, during, and after the revolution while simultaneously eliciting the support of industrial workers and at least some factions of the Mayo and Yaqui Indians.

Following his victories over Villa, Obregón did not challenge President Carranza openly. Instead, he indirectly led the forces that dominated the new constitutional convention. They created a document that legitimized the role of the "revolutionary" state, guaranteed an open, pluralistic society, and offered national, government-controlled agrarian reform and labor planks to the working classes. Obregón then withdrew to his private affairs in Sonora, only to reemerge in 1919 as a candidate for president. He organized a broad base of support that would have swept him into office, but when President Carranza attempted to suppress the challenge, Obregón fought back. United with the Zapatistas, Obregón marched on Mexico City and took over the government.

Obregón's importance as a representative of the upwardly mobile, but socially marginal, *pequeña burguesía* is well documented. But Hall's fine book leaves out another, less positive side of Obregón's career. As one who was pro-American and conservative, Obregón seems a dubious candidate for a pantheon of nationalistic and socially progressive heroes. His family was intimate with the Porfirian elite of Sonora, which included Ramón Corral, Rafael Izabal, and General Torres. Obregón refused to take part in the Maderista revolution against his friends, but as a result of the political openings it provided, he assumed the position of *presidente municipal* in Huatabampo in southern Sonora. He did so in concert with the local hacendados and businessmen, while being opposed by organized labor. He gained praise from 205 American businessmen in a letter to their government and the respect of the state oligarchy for his able suppression of Sonora's Yaqui-supported, anti-American Orozco revolt.

During 1913 a leadership crisis emerged in the state oligarchy that involved the Pesquiera clan (with whom Obregón was allied) and the Maytorenas. U.S. Army intelligence described the situation as "two political factions striving for political supremacy . . . for the honors, appointments, and patronage, which the governor has in his power to give."<sup>3</sup> In the course of the Sonoran fighting, Obregón rose to the head of the military. His chief lieutenants, Benjamin Hill and Salvador Alvarado, performed local tasks that they would repeat later in the revolution. Hill suppressed the pro-Maytorena, pro-Villista workers at Cananea, thus safeguarding American property and Pesquiera elite interests, while Alvarado attacked and slaughtered pro-Villista Mayo Indians. Obregón's and Hill's other principle military ally in the suppression of antiforeign

and populist dissent was P. Elias Calles, the corrupt and reactionary police chief of the border town of Agua Prieta. Hall's portrayal of progressive, cross-class support of Obregón's revolutionary faction seems contradicted by this terse assessment from U.S. Army Intelligence: "The military headed by Colonel P. Elias Calles, heading the Pesquiera faction, has . . . ordered the arrest of various civil authorities. . . . The Cananea situation may turn grave at any time, the laborers of the camp being strong followers of Maytorena."<sup>4</sup>

Ranchero, hacendado, and business support for Obregón was crucial to the defeat of the lower-class-led agrarians of the south and the more ambiguous, but still essentially small-town and rural-populist, Villistas. Deep differences in ideology and purpose divided the contending national revolutionary movements in 1914. The Villista-Zapatista coalition and allied forces at the convention chose the currently most prestigious and radical figure of the revolution, Eulalio Gutiérrez, the governor of San Luis Potosí, as their presidential leader. David Brading, in his introduction to *Caudillo and Peasant in the Mexican Revolution*, refers to convention president Gutiérrez as a "puppet." Gutiérrez's lack of military control ultimately removed him from the seat of power, but in the fall of 1914, he was the leading radical figure in the revolution.<sup>5</sup>

The peón and village-based nature of the Zapatista movement has been confirmed by Aguiles Chiu in "Peones y campesinos zapatistas," which is one of the five essays comprising the most important volume on Zapatismo in the last decade, *Emiliano Zapata y el movimiento zapatista*. Chiu deals the final blow to mechanistic subcategorizations of participation by the rural working class in the revolution. Chiu's interviews demonstrate widespread rural working-class and hacienda-peón support for and participation in the Zapatista military effort, including its officers. The main contingents among the armed forces were villagers, hacienda workers and peóns, and the alienated and displaced people who flooded the towns of Morelos. The problem of classifying southern and central rural people as villagers or hacienda workers reflects a misunderstanding. Regardless of de jure status, most rural workers aspired to pueblo standing for their *cuadrillas* and *rancherías*. For the *campesinaje*, it was a generalized, if not unanimous, mode of self-definition. Zapatista participation included sharecroppers and tenant farmers of all types. Their displacement to towns like Cuautla increased in the wake of the sugar bust of 1908, which forced the Mexican National Sugar Company of New York into receivership.

Further insights into rural participation in the revolution are provided by Ian Jacobs's *Ranchero Revolt: The Mexican Revolution in Guerrero* and by Frans Schryer's *Rancheros of PISAflores*. Schryer, who combines anthropological interviews with historical documentation in the most sophisticated ranchero analysis available thus far, defines them as "small

and medium-sized landholders [that] resided on their estates, employed seasonal wage laborers or peóns and rented part of their land. Unlike hacendados, they shared the deportment, speech and dress of their subordinates."<sup>6</sup> Hence the rancheros were able to maintain what the hacendados and Porfirian state had lost—social control. In the Sierra Alta de Hidalgo, at the municipios around Iguala in Guerrero, and in other far-flung outposts of the nation, rancheros supported Carranza, Obregón, Villa, Dehesa, and (one suspects) Félix Díaz, with their disparate brands of revolution. Both Jacobs and Schryer stress the limitations of such movements and their ultimate absorption through national politics and the pork barrel.

The Figueroa brothers are archetypes in Guerrero. Jacobs describes how they used their local prestige and resources during the struggle to combat the Zapatistas. Jacobs's findings in the area around Iguala contrast sharply with studies of other parts of the state—the center, the montaña toward Tlapa, and along the coast, where Zapatismo was especially strong. The greatest Zapatista strength in the state lay east of Chilpancingo and south of Chilapa, where the pueblos from Ayahualulco to the Hacienda San Marcos in the Costa Chica offered their young and their crops to regain long-lost, disputed lands from the hacendados like the Meza and Moctezuma families. Jacobs points out the fragmentation of the state, but tends to underestimate the strength of the Zapatistas in the center, Costa Chica, and Costa Grande. Jacobs ably explains the Byzantine recombinations of political forces in Guerrero that created the programmatic, crisis-solving bureaucracy of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional. In doing so, he joins Schryer in discussing the local component of what Theda Skocpol has dubbed "state-building elites."<sup>7</sup>

Dirk Raat provides 1246 well-arranged entries in *The Mexican Revolution: An Annotated Guide to Recent Scholarship*. This guide will serve as a useful starting point for researchers seeking background materials. Raat captures the political context of much post-1968 revisionism and ably synthesizes the increasingly diverse scholarship of recent years. One notable trend is the integration of a once-naïve diplomatic history with economic history, which gives government actions another dimension apart from the mere political narrative that characterized much earlier work. Raat perceptively recognizes the need to go beyond the mere institutional histories that have characterized the historiography of the industrial and rural working classes and calls for a closer examination of working-class families and consciousness. In doing so, Raat approaches the emergent European working-class historiography and the ranchero genre as presented by Schryer and Jacobs.

David Brading, a historian of colonial Mexico and longtime student of ranchero society, claims in his introduction to *Caudillo and Peasant*

in the Mexican Revolution that rancheros have been overlooked by historians of the Mexican Revolution partly because of the influence of anarchism and the International Workers of the World upon a "populist" American historiography. He is partially correct. Historians of the epic revolution have long seen the countryside as a crazy quilt of varying balances of power between peasants, middle-sized holders, and regional elites. Previously, historians did not view the rancheros as deserving special interest as an independent class force, seeing them instead as an integral part of regional power structures.

Ranchero and local histories have done much to augment general insights into the revolution. Raymond Buve's essay in *Caudillo and Peasant* stands out because of its analysis of "more or less imposed peasant mobilization." One hopes that the isolation of rancheros as a group will not provide a too-easy answer to Mexico's revolutionary labyrinth through oversimplification as a strong stratum of local elites who dominated their peasants and workers and led the revolution or counter-revolution.

Despite the pitfalls inherent in any new arena, ranchero studies are a part of an increasing emphasis on local and regional history that offers new insights into the Mexican revolutionary process. The enormous quantity of new monographic literature points to the growing need for innovative and comprehensive syntheses of this epic revolution.

#### NOTES

1. For reports on corn imports and the chaos of Porfirian domestic agriculture between 1907 and 1910, see the *Daily Consular and Trade Reports*, issued by the Bureau of Manufactures, Department of Commerce and Labor. For example, Consul Edwin S. Cunningham, "Production of Indian Corn in South Africa," Durban, Natal, no. 115, 16 November 1910; Consul Clarence A. Miller, "Mexican Importations of Grain," Tampico, no. 115, 27 October 1910; and Miller, "Heavy American Exports to Mexico," no. 107, 7 November 1910.
2. The International Railroad, which ran from Durango through Torreón and Monclova to Eagle Pass, suffered a 16-percent decline in freight profits in 1908-9 and a 9.3-percent decline in freight tonnage due to the calamitous failure of the cotton and corn crops. The Inter-oceanic Railroad hauled 9 percent less tonnage between Mexico City and the port of Veracruz. Mexican silver production fell about 7 percent while the value per ounce dropped 20 percent. The best source on the post-1905 Porfirian economic crisis is the *Commercial and Financial Chronicle* (New York). Railroad data can be found in Volume 89, pp. 1570 and 1594, 18 December 1909. Information on silver abounds. For example, see Volume 88, p. 480, 20 February 1909, and Volume 87, p. 1063, 24 October 1908, p. 1163, 31 October 1908, and p. 1383, 28 November 1908.
3. Commanding Officer, Second Cavalry Brigade, Douglas, Arizona, to the Commanding General, Southern Department, Fort Sam Houston, Texas, 8 June 1914, "Mexican Intervention." "Mexican Intervention," Records Group 92 (2149991), National Archives (Old Army and Navy Office), Washington, D.C.
4. *Ibid.*
5. The following U.S. Consular Report confirms Eulalio Gutiérrez's radicalism:

A decree issued under date September 15, 1914, by Governor Eulalio Gutierrez, fixes the minimum wage in the State of San Luis Potosi at 73 centavos per day, to

be paid in cash. . . . The 9-hour day is also decreed. Employers who have been paying more than the minimum are forbidden to reduce wages to the minimum. Workers on farms must be supplied free water, wood and shelter. By the same decree, company stores are abolished. All debts contracted by laborers are exempt from garnishment. . . . Probably the most important article in the decree provides that in view of the exceedingly low wages heretofore prevailing, all loans and advances heretofore made and now outstanding against the laborers, must be considered as a voluntary supplement to the inadequate wages and are therefore declared liquidated and canceled.

Consul Wilbert L. Bonney, "New Labor Law in Mexico," San Luis Potosí, *Daily Consular and Trade Reports*, no. 238, 10 October 1914.

6. See Frans J. Schryer, *The Rancheros of Pisasflores: The History of a Peasant Bourgeoisie in Twentieth-Century Mexico* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1980), p. 210.
7. Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia, and China* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 407 pp.