



Vol. 6, No. 1, Fall 2008, 328-335
www.ncsu.edu/project/acontracorriente

Review/Reseña

Elisa Servín, Leticia Reina, and John Tutino, eds. *Cycles of Conflict, Centuries of Change. Crisis, Reform, and Revolution in Mexico*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2007.

The Calendrics of Crisis: Mexico, 1810, 1910, 2010

Richard Warren

Saint Joseph's University

Intriguing, yet absurd, comparisons of the U.S. Presidents Abraham Lincoln and John F. Kennedy sparked imaginations in my childhood: Lincoln was elected in 1860; Kennedy in 1960. Lincoln was shot in the Ford Theater; Kennedy in a Ford limousine. Both were succeeded in the presidency by men named Johnson. Both had seven letters in their last names!!! Coincidence or evidence of a deep cosmic timetable that dictates our fate?

I've been reminded of this silliness as 2010 approaches. The call to arms that led to Mexican Independence began in 1810; that which

unleashed the Mexican Revolution in 1910. Could we be on the cusp of another outbreak of sustained social upheaval in 2010? As the facile prognostications of every self-styled Nostradamus of Mexican history begin to crop up, particularly in cyberspace, readers may be justifiably skeptical of projects that lash themselves to this jerry-rigged device as a pretext for inquiry. On the other hand, let me suggest two caveats before one dismisses out of hand all products with references to this historical “cycle.” First, in the dismal trenches of contemporary academic publishing, one cannot blame completely authors and editors for their use of intriguing hooks to attract additional readers. Second, it just might be possible to learn something new by engaging in a serious comparative enterprise of three great *fin de siècle* reform processes (the Bourbon Reforms, the Porfiriato, neo-liberalism) and their consequences, which brings us to the book currently under review. While the marketing for this collection clearly is designed to take advantage of the grand coincidence of modern Mexican history (the book’s portentous title being Exhibit A), the volume’s authors wholeheartedly reject the teleological premise that by studying the past we can predict the contours of a forthcoming Mexican Revolution redux. Rather, as the editors write in the book’s introduction, “the goal of this volume is to offer historically comparative perspectives on the origins and outcomes of the revolutions of the early nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and to place the unfolding history of conflict and change in contemporary Mexico in that context” (2). Very few ground rules, beyond this general premise, were placed on the contributors, most of whom presented drafts on this theme at two conferences and then contributed the “final” versions of their essays for publication as a book in Mexico in 2002. Additional opportunities for revision were presented when Duke University Press agreed to publish the collection in English.

An introductory essay by the editors is followed by eleven additional essays that fall into three sections. The organizing principle of the first section of the book is “Communities.” Essays by Eric Van Young, Antonio Annino, and Leticia Reina examine the relationships between rural

communities and broader political processes. In his comparison of events in Cuautitlán (1785) and Atlacomulco (1810), Van Young emphasizes the intense localism of violent protest in rural populations in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. According to Van Young, careful analysis of these events, and countless others like them across the Viceroyalty of New Spain, demonstrate that the building blocks of “horizontalism in political life,” from which might emerge cross-class, multi-ethnic alliances asserting anything close to a national identity or program were not yet formed by the outbreak of the Independence War (50). One challenge for researchers seeking to understand modern Mexico, then, is to uncover the process by which ligaments formed between local and supra-local politics. The following two essays take up this challenge. Antonio Annino’s study of the important role played by the 1812 Cádiz Constitution provides some insight on the evolution of these linkages. Annino analyzes the “two-faced Janus” of Mexican liberalism, captured in the language of the Cádiz document, which propelled an important transformation of New Spain upon its implementation in 1812. With its privileging of the *municipio* and its broad and vague definition of citizenship, the constitution provided rural communities with the tools to use “liberal” practices to defend their local traditions, power structures, and resources well beyond 1821, since many of the principles of the 1812 Constitution were maintained in post-Independence law and practice. In the final essay in this section, Leticia Reina continues this thread of inquiry with an examination of the crucial relationship between local electoral conflicts and regime crises, with particular focus on the late Porfiriato and the last decade of the twentieth century. While earlier scholarship often discounted the study of Mexico’s electoral traditions, Reina’s investigation falls squarely in the trend of recent scholarship, which notes that even fraud does not obviate the importance of electoral processes, as they potentially provide important political opportunities, links to mobilizing structures, and a language for the framing processes of social protest movements.¹

¹ The role of “political opportunities,” “framing processes” and “mobilizing

The second section of the book, "Revolutions," has contributions from François-Xavier Guerra, Alan Knight, Friedrich Katz, and John Tutino. Guerra provides another variation on his life's work, the search for the origin and development of "modern politics" in its Mexican "mutation." In concert with Annino, Guerra notes the ways in which early Mexican liberalism actually strengthened corporate organizations. As a result, modernizing Mexico distinguished itself from other "European and American areas" by a "profoundly original trait," the "central role of the mostly indigenous pueblos as permanent and essential actors in political and social life" (131). In Guerra's view, the Revolutionary regime that emerged in the twentieth century completed a process of state building begun in the nineteenth century, but only by fusing retrograde corporatism and patronage with a new language of social rights and representation. The unraveling of that compromise yielded the systemic breakdown of the late twentieth century.

Alan Knight, in inimitable fashion, tackles the potential trap of this volume's premise head-on. Drawing out in two carefully worded paragraphs the "remarkable" similarities between 1810 and 1910, he then dismisses the whole enterprise, only to return to ask serious questions suitable to a broad comparative method across time. Using his standard *modus operandi*, Knight probes the political economies of the late eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries, separating the superficial from the essential in discerning what's important (and what's less so) in contributing to the outbreak of violent upheaval and the constellation of forces that tend to skew events in one direction or another. In doing so, Knight concludes that at least two important factors distinguish contemporary Mexico's "compression" (a term borrowed from John Tutino) from the Porfiriato and the Bourbon era. First, the structural transformation of the Mexican economy is largely complete—that is, the

structures" in social protest movements is discussed in Doug McAdam, John D. McCarthy, and Mayer N. Zald, eds., *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements: Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Cultural Framings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

market place has absorbed both labor and land almost entirely—which carries myriad implications for the interface between social groups and the state (for examples, see the discussion of the essay by Tutino below). Second, events of the last twenty years have changed significantly the relationship between the once-indomitable Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) and the state, which suggests that energies that might otherwise have been channeled elsewhere may be directed toward the electoral realm (for examples, see the discussion of the essay by Semo below).

Like a number of other authors in this volume, Friedrich Katz approaches the theme of the book obliquely, yet effectively, in his essay on the relationship between international war and the increasing pull on Mexico into an orbit around the United States. In a riff on themes explored in greater detail elsewhere, Katz reminds readers that international warfare has shaped independent Mexico to a far greater degree than most Latin American countries. Taking this into account is essential for understanding the simultaneous process by which the modern Mexican state premised its existence on revolutionary nationalism and the United States consolidated its hegemony. Finally, though Katz does not state this explicitly, his essay suggests that the current state of this long-term process of integration between Mexico and the United States is another characteristic that distinguishes the “contemporary crisis” from its predecessors.

In many ways, the essay by John Tutino that follows is the anchor of the entire volume. First, it’s the longest essay by far, weighing in at over fifty pages of text, not counting notes. Second, Tutino, one of the volume’s editors, hews more explicitly to the book’s premise than most of the other authors. The result is a fine piece of historical scholarship, which engages big questions about the consequences of long-term processes without sacrificing nuance and variation. Tutino writes that the erosion of rural communities’ ecological autonomy, driven by national, then global, economic integration, which brings in its wake a transformation of the labor market triggering dramatic demographic shifts from rural to urban

environments, as well as long-distance and increasingly long-term migration, is the key difference in determining the repertoire of protest available today. The few remaining peasant communities find themselves increasingly marginalized, as their protests resonate with fewer and fewer compatriots, and those compatriots see little option but to cast themselves adrift in the global marketplace. All are encouraged by neo-liberal cheerleaders to limit their political engagement to the periodic casting of ballots for parties representing increasingly constrained options, touted as the embodiment of democracy triumphant.

Lorenzo Meyer, Guillermo de la Peña, Enrique Semo, and Elisa Servín wrote essays for the book's final section, entitled "Contemporary Crisis." Among these four authors, only Meyer explicitly compares nineteenth and twentieth century phenomena, using the liberal reform movement of the 1850s and 60s as a touchstone for analyzing the nature and impact of the neo-liberal project that emerged in the 1980s. Meyer notes the fundamental differences in the political trajectories of both reform movements over the longer term, and concludes with a cautious optimism that the political opening that expanded through the end of the twentieth century created an opportunity to "continue on the road to nonauthoritarian, socially responsible liberalism" and for the "creation and consolidation of political institutions that promote legality and social solidarity" (300).

Like that of Meyer, the essay by Guillermo de la Peña strikes a more optimistic tone than that of Tutino, though de la Peña, too, is cautious. De la Peña surveys the evolution of civil society in Mexico, from the corporate containment by the party/state in the 1940s, through the radical struggles of the 1970s, to the proliferation of social movements in the last generation. From urban barrios to indigenous pueblos, from the debtors of El Barzón to the Christian Base Communities rooted in liberation theology, De la Peña sees in the thickening web of civil society "a new culture of citizenship," "a new sense of community and new ways of bringing attention to communal demands that do not exclude anybody and are, at the same time,

compatible with modernity” (336-337). Ending on a hopeful note, de la Peña concludes that this process may yet lead to greater guarantees of fundamental human rights.

Enrique Semo focuses his brief essay on the paradoxes of the contemporary Mexican Left, as the promise of a share of national power emerged at century’s end and threatened the struggle for meaningful social change. Noting that the contemporary political Left in Mexico has forsaken the strategy of armed struggle, Semo concludes with an eye on the future and a call for the Left to articulate a unifying program that envisions a path to a socially just, pluralistic utopia, rather than just a piece of the neo-liberal pie.

The final essay by Elisa Servín examines the process of post-revolutionary political consolidation and the breaches in the system that began to manifest in the 1970s—the split between president and party; the increasing unpredictability of municipal politics; and the declining power of the presidency among them. A leading scholar of post-revolutionary political history, Servín serves her sub-field well in this essay by reminding us that the PRI/state was not a monolith between the 1940s and 1980s, which then began to collapse. However, by doing her job so well, Servín, like the other contributors to this final section of the book, exposes the Achilles’ heel of this enterprise: what exactly is Mexico’s “contemporary crisis”? Is it a crisis of political legitimacy? Economic development? Social justice? For whom? Most importantly for the purposes of the comparative enterprise, what are the temporal, spatial, and demographic dimensions of the crisis?

In the first essay of the volume, Eric Van Young articulated this key challenge for the book’s contributors in a lengthy passage on the problematic overuse of the term “crisis” in historical inquiry. Sure enough, one can reach the end of this volume and still have many questions about the parameters of the “contemporary crisis.” This observation is related to a second problem. Conceived as a project in 1998, the essays were completed in the midst of the 2000 presidential campaign. Final revisions for the

English language volume provided willing authors the opportunity to incorporate some thoughts on the election of opposition candidate Vicente Fox, as well as on the 2006 elections, in which another candidate from the National Action Party (PAN), Felipe Calderón, took the presidency. Neither of these elections turned out the way most folks expected, and as Alan Knight notes in the post-script to his essay, “events have certainly overtaken analysis” (172).

Nonetheless, at many levels, the volume is a great success. The essays succeed on their own terms—they are thoughtful and well-written. In addition, one of the merits of the volume is that it provides an opportunity for readers less familiar with the works of those contributors who haven’t published much in English to get a taste of their method and insights on Mexican history and politics. The editors and translators, then, also deserve kudos for rendering quality versions of the essays in English. For those who already know well the work of these authors, seeing new analyses side by side sparks interesting comparisons and can lead to provocative conclusions about broadly important themes in Mexican history, which the editors elucidate in a fine introductory essay.

Will Mexico have a revolution in 2010? The editors of this volume insist “no one will be more surprised than the authors of this volume” if it does (x). And my advice to the reader? Forget the pretense and just read the book.