



Vol. 6, No. 1, Fall 2008, 343-346
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Review/Reseña

Patrick J. McNamara. *Sons of the Sierra. Juarez, Díaz & the People of Ixtlan, Oaxaca, 1855-1920*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007.

Nation of Villages: Citizen and State in Nineteenth Century Mexico

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This book demonstrates, in a way that few others have, the role of the Mexican peasantry in State formation and their political involvement on a national level from the second half of the nineteenth century through the Revolution of 1910. Focusing on the heavily Zapotec district of Ixtlan, Oaxaca, Patrick McNamara explores the often overlooked intersection of local and national history and how they shaped each other over time. Ixtlan is a good place to study the dynamic. It was the birthplace of Benito Juárez,

Mexico's only indigenous president. It was also the region where future President/Dictator Porfirio Díaz cut his teeth organizing community militias into National Guard units to fight for the Liberal cause during the Wars of the Reform, and to resist the French Occupation of 1862-1867. The creation of the National Guard out of peasant communities radically altered the political landscape of rural Oaxaca. It created a separate, home-grown, military structure from the regular army and, more importantly, the armed pueblos kept their guns when the battles were over. It also gave those communities a new level of political legitimacy based on their widely recognized military contributions in securing a Liberal victory out of the national struggles from 1855-1867. McNamara argues convincingly that the local role in the larger national drama fundamentally transformed the ways in which Zapotec men and women thought of themselves in terms of the nation. Based on their sacrifices on the battlefield, their loyal service in defeating the Conservative reaction to the Liberal State, and their defense of Mexican national sovereignty against a foreign invader, they began to articulate a position that citizenship rights were not something defined, granted, and guaranteed from above but, rather, were to be negotiated between the government and the people who helped create and defend it.

It is often difficult for historians to get at the thoughts, feelings, and motivations of peasants and rural working populations because they do not always generate a substantial written record. When written evidence does exist they are often proclamations that accompany peasant rebellions and are produced by more formally educated urban, or elite, allies. That leaves not a few historians who come along later to wonder whether the grander ideas of some have been grafted onto the more basic goals of most. It also provides limited insight into what people may be thinking during less tumultuous or more "normal" times. McNamara surmounts this chronic problem with an impressive piece of scholarship. Making excellent use of over thirty years of letters to Díaz from men and women, veterans, widows, children, and entire communities in Ixtlan, the author is able to show how the people of the region envisioned the nation and their place in it. The

“Sons of the Sierra” make it clear in their written correspondence, sometimes produced by literate townspeople, sometimes by scribes, that they earned their rights of citizenship through shared struggle. The Zapotecs of Ixtlan District were proud of their history and their letters throughout Díaz’s reign recount personal and familial sacrifices, old connections to Díaz, and local histories in order to justify contemporary claims. For them, the historic, communal contributions of the people of Ixtlan during the momentous struggles of the mid-nineteenth century guaranteed their rights, and allowed them to negotiate how those rights should evolve over time. Those rights included respect for local autonomy, the right to bear arms, the just adjudication of land disputes, and the right to work. Although expressed in terms of local experience, their expectations of citizenship reflected those shared by many rural communities across Mexico, and the letters often referenced the hallowed Constitution of 1857, and their interpretation of the principles for which they had fought and died. Although they were concerned about what was happening locally, the people of Ixtlan thought nationally.

This book also explores Díaz’s military and political career and how it intersected with the history of the Sierra Zapoteca, and how that made the region’s history national history. The argument is that three distinct periods characterized the Porfiriato. During the first (1876-1890) peasant communities in the Sierra expected and received tangible benefits from their service to the nation and the role they played in securing victory alongside Díaz. Providing a more nuanced picture of the dictator’s rule during those years, the author demonstrates that in the beginning it was not based primarily on violence and repression, but consultation and compromise. During the second period (1890-1905) the generation of campesinos that had served with Díaz began to die out, and their widows and children kept alive a historical memory through celebrations designed to preserve the privileged place of the Sierra in the national story. During that period though, a new mestizo elite emerged that violated community prerogatives as they sought to take advantage of new economic

opportunities created by the Porfirian encouragement of both domestic and foreign investment, and the subsequent growth of mining, textiles, and the railroad in Oaxaca. The local elite asserted themselves more energetically than had been possible when the old Zapotec veterans had been more numerous and active. After the economic downturn of 1906, the last phase of the dictatorship saw both the local and national political establishment fall into disfavor. By delving into the local history, this book offers insight into how Díaz came to power, how he stayed in power, why his regime lasted so long, and why it finally failed.

Extensively researched, persuasively argued, and engagingly written, *Sons of the Sierra* is a major contribution to the history of nineteenth century Mexico. McNamara breaks new ground through painstaking archival research, and demolishes ideas that peasants lacked a political awareness beyond their locality. His work shows that these people had an alternative vision of citizen and nation that included mutual responsibilities and trust. Once those were violated and Díaz began to support the aggrandizement and rule of local elites to the detriment of the pueblos, and to rely more heavily on political appointments that trampled local autonomy, the once loyal pueblos voiced their disapproval of what they felt were violations of the social contract. Ixtlan provides an excellent case study, but the unique personal ties the region had with Juárez and, more significantly for this study, Díaz, raises the question of how representative the case is. The men and women from Ixtlan district knew Díaz, did not hesitate to appeal directly to the president of the Republic, and they expected results. The implications from Ixtlan should be tested by others with the same kind of rigor the author has brought to his breakthrough book. No single study can encompass the nuances of Mexico's agrarian history but the author has blazed an important trail for others to follow. Hopefully, other scholars will take up the challenge McNamara has laid down.