



Vol. 6, No. 2, Winter 2009, 307-316

www.ncsu.edu/project/acontracorriente

Review/Reseña

Timothy J. Henderson, *A Glorious Defeat: Mexico and Its War with the United*. New York: Hill and Wang, 2007.

The Mexican-American War through Another (Old) Lens

Feather Crawford Freed

University of Oregon

In this book, Timothy J. Henderson examines the origins, outcomes, and modern-day consequences of the Mexican-American War (1846-1848). *A Glorious Defeat* is organized around two central questions: why did Mexico go to war with the United States in 1846 and why did the war go so badly for Mexico? Henderson's book answers these questions for readers that he assumes are familiar with the expansionist tendencies that motivated the US to invade its southern neighbor, but who are "far less certain why Mexico went to war with the United States" (xviii).

Henderson presents his book as a corrective to an Anglo-centric body of literature that has blamed Mexico for its own losses “because they were proud to the point of delusion, arrogantly overestimating their own strength” (xviii). Henderson distinguishes his endeavor from these unnamed xenophobic strawmen, boldly claiming in his preface to privilege the Mexican perspective in his explanation for Mexico’s war with the United States. Henderson argues that it is unnecessary and unadvisable to lay blame on either participant. Without considering the position held by some—that the war started because one nation acted in aggression upon another nation—Henderson finds the origins of the Mexican-American War in the weakness of the Mexican nation. Mexico’s fractious fragility, contrasted to the thriving economy and homogenous national identity in the United States, brought about the US invasion, occupation and territorial acquisition. First, Mexican weakness attracted the predator. The US, with its appetite primed by the recent annexation of Texas, viewed the political upheavals in Mexico of the 1830s and 40s, and the central Mexican government’s tenuous bonds to its northern states, as the blood in the water, and itself as the shark. Secondly, Mexico was so self-conscious of its national weakness that its political leaders involved their country in an ill-fated war against an obviously superior country in a vain, fatalistic attempt to maintain honor and power. War with the United States gave Mexican leaders the opportunity to “indulge in the illusion” that the nation was not rent by economic, ethnic, and geographic divisions, but was instead “resolute and united against a foreign foe” (191).

Henderson attempts to “understand Mexico’s weakness and how that weakness helped land it in a war with the United States,” relying heavily on evidence of Mexico’s disadvantages in comparison to the vitality and abundance of the United States (xix). In order to demonstrate the historical, demographic, and geographic weaknesses that hobbled the Mexican nation upon inception, Henderson contrasts the Mexican and US colonial legacies, ethnic compositions, routes to independence, and geographic landscapes. This methodology allows Henderson to move through complex histories at a fast, easy clip, while staying faithful to his

organizing principles of Mexico's inherent weaknesses and the United States' inevitable advancement.

The most successful aspect of Henderson's explanation is his description of the geographic features in the Mexican landscape that have arguably complicated Mexico's ability to cohere. The central plateaus of Mexico, home to the federal government and most of the country's population, are interrupted by volcanic mountains and deep chasms. Travel and transport within the political and administrative center are complicated by these geographic features and connections between central Mexico and the perimeter are even less ideal. The vast Mexican hinterlands, themselves diverse in ecology and regional character, are not connected by navigable rivers or easily traveled terrain, therefore the exploitation and transportation of Mexico's rich natural resources could not readily benefit the nation's material production.

Unfortunately, Henderson spends very little time on the natural shape of the terrain that comprises Mexico. He does not attempt to draw analytical connections between the landscape diversity and Mexico's heterogeneous political culture, or examine how Mexico's geographically imposed regionalism and pockets of isolated populations influenced the uneven development of a Mexican national identity in the former Spanish colony, in ways that could add depth and nuance to our understandings of nation building.

Instead, Henderson emphasizes the historical events that the US and Mexico hold in common, like their colonial origins and wars of independence. Henderson traces the weakness that caused Mexico to fight and inevitably lose a war with the US to its disabling colonial legacy. Spain's "medieval" influence empowered a Mexican elite who "clung" to the traditional rights, inherited privileges, and material inequalities that they believed were established by God and the church (4-5). The US, in contrast, was formed and led by men steeped in the theories of the Enlightenment and who favored reason, progress, change, individualism, merit, equality, and a just social contract. While the US had few obstacles to landownership, education, and responsible citizenship, Mexico was profoundly disadvantaged by the land-holdings and paternalism of the

Catholic Church and the rigid social distinctions between Mexicans. By the 1830s, white literacy was high in the United States, and the absence of class difference among citizens resulted in a cohesive, politically conscious, and ethnically homogenous republic. Mexico, in contrast, was deeply divided along lines of both class and race.

Using a framework that combines some elements of the Black Legend of Spanish colonialism with a recognition of micro-patriotic locations of contestation within imperial projects, Henderson seems to find the main reason for Mexico's weakness (and therefore the cause of Mexico's loss of its northern territory) in the persistence of the Mexican Indians. The indigenous people of Mexico, or "settled peasantry," as Henderson calls them, and their pervasive illiteracy, were a barrier to the development of a land-owning citizenry modeled by the US (5). Moreover, due to Spain's counterproductive tendency to allow ethnic, linguistic, and cultural diversity, and an "exaggerated regionalism" to exist in New Spain, there were large populations of Mexican Indians who were completely unassimilated and ignorant of their national identity (12).

Henderson credits the Spanish Empire, rather paradoxically, with both leaving Mexico with a particularly nasty colonial legacy he calls a "holocaust," one that reduced Tenochtitlán to a "stinking rubble," and creating a legal system that protected the rights of indigenous people and respected collective land-holdings and regional authorities (7). "For all their brutality and callousness," muses Henderson, "in fact the Spaniards were great innovators in the area of race relations" (7-8). Centuries of Spanish policies that allowed Indian villages to maintain pre-Conquest traditions, languages, and social structures kept large swathes of the national population unconnected to the Mexican state and unconcerned with its defensive war with the United States. Mexico's weakness, according to Henderson, is rightly located in this "muddled" Mexican ethnic identity (7). The indigenous Mexican population that survived the Spanish imperial "holocaust," was large, varied and far-flung and, in Henderson's words, they remained "too large to be eradicated or removed" (7). The indigenous people of Mexico, their sheer numbers, and their diverse cultures were obstacles to the type of national identity that was necessary to survive as a

strong, independent and self-confident nation in the first half of the nineteenth century. Henderson claims to “make no effort to resolve the question of which side—Mexico or the United States—was to ‘blame’ for the war” (xviii). However, through a sort of neo-positivistic analysis, Henderson concludes that the overly-populous and unassimilated Mexican Indians held Mexico back from the nation-building success of its northern neighbor. The Indians in the United States, conveniently, were “too scattered, weak, and unorganized to put up successful resistance, leaving them vulnerable to ruthlessly efficient extermination or relocation at the hands of whites” (5).

The ethnic and economic divisions that in Henderson’s analysis were the sources of Mexico’s initial weakness also compromised national sovereignty as Mexico fought for independence. For the US, the “road to independence” was bloody, but purposeful (18). The leaders and statesmen who led the independence movement became the nation’s founding fathers and iconic guardians of myth and nationalism, champions of freedom and equality. The Mexican Wars of Independence, in contrast, were fought by Creole generals and elites who were eager to maintain or even increase the social and economic divisions between their class and the majority of the Mexican population. For their part, according to Henderson, most Mexican Indians hated both the Creoles who fought for independence and sovereignty and the Spanish who fought to maintain colonial possession. The native Mexicans, the numerous, settled, and ‘stubborn’ peasantry, again impeded modernity by failing to appropriately engage in independence and nation-building projects and by provoking a conservative backlash.

Natives who did participate in anti-colonial activity, like the indigenous men who followed Father Hidalgo in 1810, were “exhorted to exact revenge upon the gachupines for three centuries of humiliation and despoilment” and went on a rampage. According to Henderson, Hidalgo’s attack on Guanajuato was tainted by native violence taken to a repulsive level by indigenous rebels who “increased the horror by decapitating the Spanish prisoners” (20). Horrified by such demonstrations of violent Indians, the new Creole government attempted to keep lower-class

Mexicans from turning into dangerous Jacobins. Mexico circa 1821, in Henderson's estimation, was laden with a dubious colonial legacy, rife with class and ethnic conflict, and, rather teleologically, already doomed to lose half of its territory to the United States. Henderson uses the following seven chapters to relate a progressive narrative: the chaotic Caudillismo of the early Mexican republic and the discreet involvement of gentleman-diplomat Joel Poinsett in the US attempts to purchase Texas from the floundering nation; the growing despotism of Santa Anna in Mexico City and the thriving Austin colony in Texas; the increasingly independent Texan republicans and the belatedly defensive Mexicans. With an engaging narrator's voice, Henderson uses evidence of Mexico's weakness to prove that Mexico's weakness resulted in Mexico's weakness. A clear and superficially intuitive tale, *A Glorious Defeat* is nevertheless prone to circular reasoning, false dichotomies, teleology, and Anglophilia.

Henderson employs teleological images and language in his book to evoke the inevitability of the ultimate reconfiguration of the Mexican-American border. The momentum of progress defeated the forces of inertia as "Texas continued to slip inexorably away" from Mexico in the 1830s (75). Even acts of God seemed to indicated the hopelessness of any attempts by Mexico to resist the loss of Texas and Henderson finds foreshadowing in a "plague" in Mexico City in 1833 and a series of earthquakes and storms in 1841 (87, 117).

The data Henderson provides as evidence are an uncomfortable fit with his argument. In order to demonstrate the deficit from which Mexico operated, Henderson repeatedly contrasts Mexico and the US, using travel literature and demographic information as his sources. Regrettably, Henderson's analysis relies on a false parity between the demographic and social information he provides. For Henderson's purposes the US population consists only of Anglo-Americans. US statistics for literacy rates, or other indicators of standards of living, omit US Indians or African-Americans. The statistics used to reflect living standards in Mexico, in contrast, are derived from the entire population, including isolated native communities speaking one of the many indigenous languages. In another example, Henderson describes Secretary Legate Brantz Mayer's 1844

depiction of Mexico City as a “vivid portrait of the famed Mexican *lépero*, with his long, vermin infested hair, torn and stinking clothing, and wild eyes” (10). Mayer’s descriptions of the “appalling squalor” and Mexicans who are “clad in dirty rags, covered with frightful sores and wounds living from crime or begging” are not compared to parallel examples from impoverished US immigrant neighborhoods, Indian Removal centers or slave quarters (10). Instead, Henderson uses a flawed assumption of demographic equivalency between the Anglo-Americans and Mexicans. It is as if, by mentioning that “Of course in the United States slaves, Indians, and indentured servants were not held to be equal to free, white Americans,” and that such contradictions were “glaring exceptions” to elite US rhetoric, Henderson gives himself license to remove US Blacks and Indians from consideration in his demographic comparisons (6). Since his argument relies on the assertion that the US won its war with Mexico due to its inexorable advance and innately superior ability to form a republic, these false equivalencies are particularly problematic.

Moreover, Henderson’s use of sources is insufficient. The translated and edited diary of Manuel Mier y Terán, the tragic Mexican general and patriot who sounded the alarm over US immigration into Texas in 1828, is one of the only Mexican sources in a book supposed to reveal the Mexican perspective. Alexis de Tocqueville’s comparisons of a democratic society in the US to Mexican poverty and backwardness are rounded out by Alexander von Humboldt and Fanny Calderón de la Barca’s classic outsider descriptions of nineteenth-century Mexico. Henderson cites noted historical works (Anna, Brading, Costeloe, Green, Weber), and some very dated narratives (Rippy, Rives, Manning, Siegal,), but neglects many others. A “Suggestions for further reading” section, following Henderson’s five pages of reference notes, is not an adequate substitute for the kind of bilingual bibliography that would assure his readers that he provides insight into the Mexican-American War. Particularly in light of the xenophobic strawman erected by Henderson in his preface, this omission seems ultimately disingenuous in the face of a historiography that includes

reasonable and important analyses.¹ In contrast to the anti-Mexican position he sees himself opposing, Henderson's corrective reexamination of the Mexican-American War seems itself at times a product of bias.

Henderson claims to look at his topic from the Mexican perspective, but strategically uses pejorative language to describe Mexican motivations and cultures, and heroic language to evoke US strengths and inevitability. The men who founded the United States republic were "enlightened," "liberal," and "vigorous" and their politics "assertive" and "robust" (5, 12). While Henderson acknowledges the expansionist tendencies of the US and occasionally refers to US self-interest, slavery, and Indian Removal, the national narrative he constructs is one of progress, equality, and freedom. Mexico and Mexicans, however, are consistently described with negative language. The Spanish legacy, likened to a holocaust, was "violent and traumatic," Spaniards were "brutal and callous," and Spanish law a "chaotic jumble" (7, 10, 13). Henderson's descriptions of Mexico City contain adjectives like "grotesque" and "squalor," and the non-white urban "rabble" are characterized by their "dirty rags and frightful sores"(10).

More troubling are the negative images Henderson conjures when he discusses Mexican political and social consciousness. In 1810, the indigenous people who fought with Hidalgo "indulged themselves in an orgy of looting, pillaging, murder and mutilation," forcing pro-independence Creoles like Hidalgo to "gaze into the maw of barbarism" (20). In 1828, when riots at the Parian marketplace and the popular mobilization of the Acordada culminated in a political coup d'état, "the violence of the attack was appalling," and Creole leadership once again

¹ See Irving W. Levinson, *Wars Within War: Mexican Guerillas, Domestic Elites, and the United States of America, 1846-1848* (Texas Christian University Press, 2005). Levinson offers an important reexamination of the war in a way that recognizes the role of Mexican Indians in the events of the 1840s at a level of complexity that explores indigenous agency, race and class, as well as the collusion between the US military and Mexican political elites. Henderson cites Levinson's work, but his contribution to the field, as well as works on the subject by Andreas V. Reichstein, Pedro Santoni, and Brian Delay do not seem to inform Henderson's argument.

faced the “specter of barbarism” (47). Other historians interpret these events both differently and convincingly.²

Likewise, Henderson negatively characterizes Mexican responses to the Texas Revolution and the US invasion. Mexican troops following Santa Anna to war against Texan secessionists were “vagabonds, Indians and criminals” and those he led a decade later against the United States were “ragged” (93, 106). While Santa Anna may well have been a “tyrant” who demonstrated “brutality” and “cruelty” when he “slaughtered” prisoners at the Alamo and engaged in other “butcheries” against Anglo-American soldiers and settlers, the language chosen by Henderson to describe him becomes dense with value-heavy adjectives (92, 96, 97, 99, 101). Compared to the bloody and “inept” Santa Anna, General Winfield Scott fares much better in Henderson’s retelling (101). General Scott, unburdened in Henderson’s narrative by his own, well-documented and bloody legacy, was “gifted in both the military arts and those of diplomacy” and “carefully cultivated the good will of the people” (168). Noted scholars specializing in Cherokee removal and the Mexican-American war often associate General Scott’s military activity with sobering instances of collateral damage.³ Henderson juxtaposed the image of Scott entering the Zócalo of Mexico City “resplendent in full-dress uniform” to raise the “Stars and Stripes...over the National Palace,” with that of the niños heroes de Chapultepec, the Mexican teenagers who suicidally fought to their death and “provided the ultimate symbol of Mexico’s doomed resistance” (171-172).

The anti-Mexican bias in Timothy J. Henderson’s book is much more obvious and objectionable given that he had promised a Mexican

² See Silvia Arrom, “Popular Politics in Mexico City: The Parian Riot, 1828.” *Hispanic American Historical Review*, 68:2 (1988). Arrom explores the significantly political nature of the 1828 uprisings in Mexico, and the way the violence was exaggerated in its re-telling by partisans in order to discredit the political culture of members of Mexico City’s underclass.

³ See Theda Perdue and Michael D Green, *The Cherokee Nation and the Trail of Tears* (New York: Viking, 2007) for concise summary of General Scott’s authority over Cherokee removal in 1838 during which at least 4,000 (over 25% of those removed) died during removal on the Trail of Tears. See also *Wars Within War* by Levinson for an account of the violence committed against Mexican civilians by American troops under Scott’s command. Levinson observes that Scott’s “disregard for civilian casualties mirrored his previous work as commander of the 1838 expulsion of the Cherokee Nation from Georgia” (31).

perspective on the Mexican-American War. In his concluding remarks, Henderson writes: “Certainly it’s not hard to find examples of Mexican bluster and bellicosity, but the great irony and tragedy of the war is the fact that nearly all Mexicans in a position to make decisions realized full well that entering a war with the United States was folly and that Mexico’s loss was a foregone conclusion” (188). Historical examinations of foregone conclusions, based on limited and compromised data explained with highly-charged language and biased descriptions are not only disappointing, but also dangerous. When Henderson asserts that “the war, in the end, only caused a further unraveling of an already broken nation,” he obliges his readers to abandon historical analysis in exchange for a narrative that reifies the xenophobic strawman he claims to confront.