

Reseña / Review

Mark Saad Saka. *For God and Revolution: Priest, Peasant, and Agrarian Socialism in the Mexican Huasteca*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2013.

Land, Politics, and Rebellion in Mexico's *Huasteca Potosina*

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In *For God and Revolution*, Mark Saad Saka offers a fascinating, if somewhat limited, examination of a late-19th-century peasant rebellion in the highlands of the Mexican state of San Luis Potosí. On one hand, the book succeeds in chronicling the military and agrarian history of this region—the Huasteca Potosina—from the mid to late 1800s. Peasants were first armed, and then angered as the Mexican state called upon them to fight off invading forces in the U.S.-Mexico War (1846-1848) and rewarded for their service by auctioning their communal land to the highest bidder. Moreover, the study offers an original contribution to regional scholarship. While other scholars have dealt with the Huasteca around this period, Saka is the first to take up the rebellions in San Luis Potosí and situate them in the realm of popular politics.¹ As he explains, “[t]he story of the Huastecan uprisings offers a new

¹ For works on the 19th-century Huasteca, see Antonio Escobar Ohmstede and Luz Carregha, eds., *El siglo XIX en las Huastecas* (Mexico City: CIESAS, 2002); and Michael Ducey, *A Nation of Villages: Riot and Rebellion in the Mexican Huasteca, 1750–1850* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2004). For works on popular politics in 19th-century Mexico, see Florencia Mallon, *Peasant and Nation: The Making of Postcolonial Mexico and Peru* (Berkeley: University of

perspective on the origins of Mexican nationalism and incorporates the peasantry into the national historical process" (xii). But on the other hand, Saka's emphasis on peasants' relationship to the state glosses over peasants' relationships to each other, and to other local players such as priests. Without deeper, village-level analysis, the reader has at best a circumscribed understanding of what "God and revolution" meant to the rebels themselves.

Saka begins his study with the region's cultural and demographic history. Chapter 1 describes gradual ethnic mixture in the Huasteca as Otomí and Nahuatl migrants from the central valley, in addition to how runaway African slaves from the Gulf lowlands, made their way into the sierra during the colonial period. Along the way, the reader learns a few interesting tidbits that complicate the prevailing understanding of race relations in the colonial period. For example, Saka joins a growing number of scholars in pointing out that "Indian" villages were not as ethnically homogenous as they presented themselves in the late colonial period.² In the Huastecan "Teenek village" of Tamuín, Saka claims people of African descent made up 13 percent of the total population (14-15).³ Regrettably, he does not pursue this point further, other than to say, "[t]wo hundred and fifty years of colonial miscegenation [...] injected a tradition of rebellion and guerrilla-style military tactics into the rural population" (15). Saka suggests other cultural traditions largely fell away before the dominant Teenek identity, creating at most a "'Nahuatlized' Teenek" (12).⁴ He thus forecloses a discussion of ethnic mixture and its possible ramifications in the social and political spheres in the 19th century. There, the narrative largely becomes one of "Indian" pueblos and creole hacienda owners.

The military narrative begins in the second chapter. Saka briefly touches upon Huastecan peasants' participation in the independence war from 1811-1812 and a

California Press, 1995); Peter Guardino, *Peasants, Politics, and the Formation of Mexico's National State: Guerrero, 1800-1857* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996); and Guy Thomson with David LaFrance, *Patriotism, Politics, and Popular Liberalism in Nineteenth-Century Mexico: Juan Francisco Lucas and the Puebla Sierra* (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 1999).

² John Tutino points out, by the late 17th century, "the growing population classed as indio and organized in patriarchal households to sustain commercial production on the bottomlands included not only people of diverse Mesoamerican ancestry but significant numbers (surely 10 percent, perhaps 20) of descendants of African slaves"; *Making a New World: Founding Capitalism in the Bajío and Spanish North America* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 153.

³ Saka gets this and other, similar statistics from Isabel Monroy de Martí, *Pueblos, misiones y presidios de la intendencia de San Luis Potosí* (San Luis Potosí: Archivo histórico del estado, 1991).

⁴ Here Saka cites the ethnohistorian Guy Stresser Peán, "Los indios Huastecos," in *Huastecos y totonacos*, edited by Lorenzo Ochoa, 187-205 (Mexico City: CONACULTA, 1989).

federalist rebellion in 1836, but his focus here is on the U.S.-Mexico War. In that conflict—“the largest rupture in the early national era for the Huasteca Potosina”—he emphasizes a fierce nationalism among peasant fighters (21). These rebels formed small guerrilla units, oftentimes led by local parish priests, to attack U.S. supply lines. But after the war, as Saka discusses in chapter 3, armed peasant guerrillas were disillusioned by the Mexican government’s decision to cease fighting and cede half the national territory to its northern enemy. They then redirected their fight into a broader agrarian, moderately anticlerical rebellion. Cross-class groups of indigenous day laborers, mestizo ranchers, and creole largeholders fought for a variety of political programs: from redistributing land and curtailing clerical privilege in the late 1840s to “anarcho-communism” in the 1850s (48–49).

The consolidation of a Liberal state in the late 1860s and 1870s further alienated Huastecan peasants. Chapters 5 and 6 detail the introduction of agrarian reform laws and export-oriented agriculture in the region and its effects on peasant landholding. Medium- and large holders bought up tens of thousands of acres of village communal plots in the late 1870s. Railroads streamlined travel in the region and inflated nearby land rents. And, as haciendas turned from subsistence crops to labor-intensive commercial crops such as sugar, demand for cheap labor increased. These developments ultimately brought Huastecos to their 1879–1884 peasant rebellion.

Saka covers this rebellion in his final two chapters. Chapter 7 addresses the radical politics behind the movement, and the author presents the fascinating cleric/socialist/rebel leader Mauricio Zavala. From his position as the parish priest of a small Huastecan town, Zavala “succeeded in politicizing his parishioners.” He hired lawyers to defend villages in the court system, advocated for communal landownership, and ultimately called for violent insurrection (104). Furthermore, Zavala grounded this “revolutionary” action in a platform of “agrarian socialism,” although the priest’s politics may not have been quite as revolutionary as Saka suggests. While Saka claims Zavala’s politics offered a “stark contrast to the positions of both the Liberal and Conservative parties,” it seems instead the cleric drew a little from each. For example, Zavala adopted the Conservative stance regarding Church property, criticizing Liberal disentailment laws for crippling the institution’s ability to care for the poor (104-105). Tomás Mejía, the Conservative champion in the nearby

Sierra Gorda, had made the same critique two decades before.⁵ And despite denouncing “foreignism,” Zavala advocated for and assisted European migration to the Huasteca, an accomplishment of which his Liberal predecessors had only dreamed (105, 111).⁶ But this does not necessarily mean that Zavala’s espousal of socialism was insincere. The cleric maintained ties to radical leftists in Mexico City, who in turn promoted “the military line of the Huasteca Potosina.” Other urban radicals helped found a socialist party in the Huasteca. In addition, socialism seems to have gained some local traction. Leading members of Huastecan party doubled as leaders in the rebellion (109–110). The book concludes with an outline of the rebellion itself, from its 1879 call for a “socialist struggle” to its violent conclusion as federal forces crushed the insurgency five years later in 1884 (125).

While this study excels at overarching political and military narrative, it is weakest in the realm of intra-village dynamics. To reconstruct the rebellion, Saka relies almost exclusively on contemporary newspapers and the state archive in San Luis Potosí. He gleans important information from these sources, but they seem somewhat limited for a study at the local level.⁷ First, de-emphasizing local politics leads to fundamental questions about the composition and motivations of rebel forces. For example, Saka posits the multiple rebellions of the late 1840s began as cross-class, nationalist anti-U.S. movements, then distilled into local agrarian conflict between peasants and hacienda owners. Thus, when peasants “threatened to turn [Tomás Mejía’s] antigovernment coalition into a class and ethnic rebellion by seizing the hacienda lands...Mejía and other leaders withdrew.” But Saka then takes pains to dispel notions that the rebellion was a “race struggle,” pointing to the movement’s continuing elite creole support (34-36). Other rebellions across the highlands receive the same treatment as Saka rightly emphasizes their cross-class, cross-ethnic following.⁸ The question then remains: if not racial or class motivations, what led

⁵ Mejía defended the Church’s ownership of real estate as it “pertain[ed] to the poor,” in the Plan de la Sierra Gorda, pronounced on 2 December 1855; Maribel Miró Flaquer, *El general Rafael Olvera: Cacique de la Sierra Gorda y gobernador de Querétaro* (Querétaro: Universidad Autónoma de Querétaro, 2012), 46-48.

⁶ James Cypher discusses Liberal calls for European immigration to the Sierra Gorda-Huasteca region in the 1840s in “Reconstituting Community: Local Religion, Political Culture and Rebellion in Mexico’s Sierra Gorda, 1846–1880” (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, 2007), 25.

⁷ The list of farmers filing land *denuncias* in chapter 6 demonstrates that not all Indians were poor peasants, for example, 91-92.

⁸ For example, see his discussion of the Plan of Tamazunchale; 44.

Mejía and his troops to abandon the rebellion?⁹ In addition, the late-1870s conflicts had a distinctly ethnic flavor as Indian peasants lined up against mestizo ranchers (87-88). What did it mean to be “Indian” in the 1870s? Furthermore, other players are difficult to pin down. On p. 88, Miguel Rivera is a “lawyer in Tamazunchale, acting on behalf of the ‘indios,’ [lodging] a series of protests with the state gov’t, arguing that the campesinos had possessed the lands since ‘time immemorial’...” But a few pages later Rivera apparently takes the opposite position as a *jefe político* in town, “giving the Sociedad agrícola the green light to privatize” a third of municipal lands and stirring up “peasant resistance” (90). Is Rivera merely a treacherous opportunist, or are the indios/campesinos and peasants presented here distinct groups? A deeper investigation of village politics would help the reader grasp these and other actors’ motivations.

Second, the ambivalent relationship between priests and parishioners is left unexplained. On one hand, numerous priests actively supported the various armed movements under study here. The prime example is Fr. Zavala, of course, but others included José María Melo, who fought in an 1847 rebellion. But on the other hand, many of the rebellions were decidedly anticlerical—indeed, many of the rebel priests acted in anticlerical ways. Fr. Melo curiously led rebels who had earlier declared, “the priests are the true scourge of the exploited class” (38). And the unorthodox Zavala himself advocated religious tolerance and encouraged his followers to take communion in their homes (111-112). The question remains: were these clerics actually acting as religious leaders, shepherding their followers in spiritual matters, or were they simply rebels who happened to have trained as clergymen? One gets the sense that family ties bonded some of the rebel priests to their followers. Fr. Melo had fathered another rebel leader with a local Indian woman (41). And it is at least possible that the “Padre *Touqitud*” of Tanchanhuitz—who signed a declaration of support for the Mexican war effort in 1847—was related to the “military strongman” José Pablo *Jongitud* from the same town (28, 64). But this was not likely the case for Fr. Zavala, the son of Guatemalan immigrants (104). If extant, Church and municipal records may shed some light on rebels’ religious practices, and their relationship to their priests.

⁹ Although Saka does not mention it, Tomás Mejía led the subsequent campaign to put down the rebellion; Fernando Díaz Ramírez, *La vida heroica del General Tomás Mejía* (Mexico City: Editorial Jus, 1970), 22-23.

Finally, there are a few minor troubles with the work. For example, the opening sentence of the preface states that the 1879 rebellion was directed “against the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz” (xi). The opposite seems to be the case, however. Saka later explains that the 1879 movement only began in earnest after a forged letter from Díaz legitimated the rebellion: “[t]he document [...] gave Santiago’s people permission to defend themselves ‘with their arms in hand’” (127). While the Díaz regime undoubtedly perceived the rebellion as a threat, it is somewhat misleading to suggest the movement was, in fact, overtly anti-state in nature. It seems instead to have been an entirely agrarian affair, despite Fr. Zavala’s far-reaching politics. Additionally, no outside sources are credited for the maps included in this book, although they are obviously taken from other works. Three are borrowed directly from Peter Gerhard’s *Historical Geography of New Spain*, but Gerhard is neither cited nor listed in the bibliography.¹⁰ Moreover, maps 4 and 6 appear to be identical (40, 42). These oversights should be corrected in subsequent editions.

The above critiques aside, this is a quick, fascinating read. *For God and Revolution* accomplishes what Saka sets out to prove—that peasants in the seemingly remote Huasteca Potosina were nevertheless invested in national politics, and offered sophisticated challenges to the state when it failed to address their demands. It is a welcome addition to the scholarship on popular politics in rural Mexico.

¹⁰ Peter Gerhard, *A Guide to the Historical Geography of New Spain*, rev. ed. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993), 4, 6, 354.