

Review / Reseña

Pensado, Jaime M. *Love and Despair: How Catholic Activism Shaped Politics and the Counterculture in Modern Mexico*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2023. 374 pp.

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The 1960s were a time of social upheaval in Mexico. Scholar of Mexican student politics and youth culture Jaime Pensado shines light on the lesser-known role of Catholics during this period in his new monograph, *Love and Despair: How Catholic Activism Shaped Politics and the Counterculture in Modern Mexico*. Pensado follows up on his titles *Rebel Mexico: Student Unrest and Authoritarian Political Culture During the Long Sixties* (2013) and *México Beyond 1968: Revolutionaries, Radicals, and Repression during the Global Sixties and Subversive Seventies* (2018) by re-examining the long Global Sixties in Mexico, as he terms it, from approximately 1956 to 1976. In this book, he examines how self-defined Catholics—priests, writers, students, intellectuals, and filmmakers—embraced notions of collective love for others and a better society, while still encountering a sense of despair in the variety of forces that they faced through their activism.

This book does indeed take its title seriously, revolving around “love” and “despair.” Pensado argues that the renewed conservatism of the Global Sixties transformed young Catholics. They embraced love, pushing for “religious pluralism and a greater dialogue with modernity, social action, political tolerance, innovative artistic expression, and the liberation of sexuality” (5). These Catholic movements sought for a more democratic Mexico. However, they ultimately could not transform the country. By the end of this period, “their leaders failed to achieve the utopian expectations of

the era, or when they were repressed and their ideas co-opted, marginalized, and commercialized, the liberating hope of love often turned into despair” (6).

Pensado supports his argument over the course of three parts and nine chapters, bookended by an introduction and conclusion. Each section presents a separate theme, with its respective chapters providing different case studies. In part one, “Modernity and Youth,” he focuses on the changing values of Cold War Mexico. The first chapter examines the life of Emma Ziegler and her role as a female activist for a Catholic national cinema in the 1950s. In another, Pensado compares two Catholic lay university student organizations of the 1950s and 1960s—the Corporation of Mexican Students and the Movement of Professional Students—and how they expressed different political perspectives. Part two, “State Violence, Progressive Catholicism, and Radicalization,” looks at Catholic activists during an ever-repressive Mexican government. In one chapter, Pensado writes about the rise of a Catholic journalism that attended to the issues of student activism and state violence. The following chapter describes how the Tlatelolco and Corpus Christi massacres of the late sixties and early seventies radicalized Catholic activists. Pensado closes out this section dealing with how Catholics navigated discussions of whether to take up arms and if they should pursue socialism. The third and last part of the book, “The Counterculture, Liberation, and the Arts,” looks at subcultural movements responding to the activism of the era and how they utilized the arts to represent their perspectives. Pensado starts by examining how Catholics engaged with *la onda* (the wave), an artistic movement pushing the boundaries of Mexico’s social norms. Another chapter showcases how the University Cultural Center at the National Autonomous University of Mexico both promoted avant-garde cinema and unified the church with the nation’s youth. The following chapter highlights Catholic activist and novelist Vicente Leñero who emphasized the liberating power of Christ, writing stories about sexual freedom and redemption. Pensado closes his book with a case study examining how Catholics of the Global Sixties reflected on cinematic interpretations of the Mexican church-state conflict of the 1920s.

Pensado emphasizes that his work brings together two fields of literature. One is “a secular body of work, mostly written from the perspective of the Left, that has all too often caricatured Catholicism as monolithic.” Another prioritizes “an institutional history of the church and its national ecclesiastical authorities” (273). His work integrates these two scholarships quite well. The historiography that considers progressive Catholicism in Mexico during the second half of the twentieth century

exists, but it is quite small and largely focuses on the larger Latin American theological trend of liberation theology. While other scholars look at only one religious leader or movement, Pensado instead provides a comparative approach through various compact case studies. As for the literature that examines the Catholic Church and Catholics more broadly, there is indeed quite a bit of top-down institutional histories. Nonetheless, just like him, scholars are currently delving into bottom-up subjects in relation to activism, counterculture, and gender. Ultimately, Pensado's unification of these two fields encourages scholars to think of 1960s activism in Mexico as tied not only to secular university student activists frequently associated with Tlatelolco and El Halconazo, but rather to consider religious activists as well.

What really sets Pensado's work apart is his inclusion of the arts, particularly cinema. It is clear early on that the author is writing a political and social history of the Global Sixties. However, his inclusion of cultural history provides an added dimension to this work. His case study of Emma Ziegler inserts this relatively unknown Catholic woman into the mid-century "golden age of cinema." He describes how she "took advantage of her relationship with Catholic Action and, making a name for herself in Mexican circles, became a pioneering activist of the new cinematic movement that emerged in the 1950s" (35). Ziegler promoted films in parishes across the country and also wrote movie reviews. Although she did not create a Catholic national cinema as she hoped, Pensado emphasizes that she educated and empowered her peers. Even beyond the chapter on Ziegler, the author highlights the important role that cinema had on Catholic activists, regardless of whether they agreed with the respective films. The reader finishes the book having a better understanding of 1960s cinema in Mexico. By incorporating cultural history into his work on Catholic activism, Pensado opens the doors to other scholars to do the same.

Love and Despair inserts Catholics into the complex activist history of the Long 1960s. By doing so, Jaime Pensado's work demonstrates the importance of Catholic politics during the era. The book is certainly a welcome addition to the literature, not only to the political, social, and cultural history of modern Mexico, but to Cold War and Catholic Mexico as well.