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Review/Reseña

Paul K. Eiss. *In the Name of El Pueblo: Place, Community, and the Politics of History in Yucatán*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2010.

Communities Making Histories

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Paul Eiss has produced a probing history of communities and debates about community in the Hunucmá region of northwest Yucatán. In revealing episodes, the study extends from the mid-nineteenth century to contemporary times. The analysis is innovative in important ways, notably by revealing communities' often conflictive participations in key local and regional developments and by exploring their often contested constructions of their own historical understandings. Within that project, Eiss pays particular attention to exploring the contested meanings of the idea of *El Pueblo*—which in Spanish blends notions of the people and the community

in ways that makes it a common referent, often debated, and always changing.

In the Name of El Pueblo joins a wave of strong studies that use local inquiries to illuminate not only local histories and cultures, but also the regional, national, and global historical trajectories in which they are embedded. Eiss acknowledges the foundational importance of Luis González y González' *Pueblo en vilo*.¹ He finds close kinship with Greg Grandin's *Blood of Guatemala*² and Florencia Mallon's *Courage Tastes of Blood*.³ Emilio Kourí's *A Pueblo Divided*⁴ and Gillian McGillivray's *Blazing Cane*⁵ follow parallel paths, with greater focus on production. All delve deeply into local worlds, engaging locally contested politics and locally negotiated ways of arguing and understanding, always in the context of regional, national, and global powers and debates. They aim to understand more deeply not only the communities of focus, but also larger historical developments. These studies all show people using local grounding, organization, and conflicts, along with locally constructed and contested understandings, to shape their own lives and histories in limited yet meaningful ways. They open to us a world in which communities struggle to shape regional, national, and global developments in limited yet meaningful ways.

In the context of this important historiographical movement, *In the Name of El Pueblo* proves strong as a study of local ways of life, conflict, and understanding—and especially of contested ways of understanding within changing communities. It is more limited than the models cited above in its exploration of the larger forces that surrounded, engaged, limited, yet never simply ruled life in Hunucmá. The result is a book of enduring importance for those working to understand the history of Yucatán. It is less effective in seeing Hunucmá communities as participants in the larger history of Mexico and the world.

¹ (Mexico City: El Colegio de México, 1968); English translation by John Upton, *San José de Gracia* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982).

² (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000).

³ (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).

⁴ (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004)

⁵ (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).

Following the structure of the book, I will proceed episodically. The first chapter focuses on the middle of the nineteenth century, in the era of the Caste War of the 1840s. The people of Hunucmá participated little in that conflict; many served in the forces defending the powerful. Having stood aside from the rising that defined Yucatán's nineteenth century, they turned the courts to resist mounting land taking by engrossing entrepreneurs—and by the mid-1850s they had failed in a devastating court case. Eiss details local actions and reactions with clarity and nuance.

Yet key questions remain unasked: why did so few in Hunucmá mobilize in the Caste War, the rising that came so close to re-claiming Yucatán for the Maya majority? He notes in passing that perhaps social controls were stronger in Hunucmá than elsewhere. Perhaps, but the question could be engaged in greater complexity thanks to the deep historiography on colonial Yucatán and the challenges of the independence era that led to the Caste War.⁶ The consequences of inaction came quickly. Soon enough estate builders in Hunucmá were claiming lands. Eiss documents community attempts to block land privatizations in court—and the court sanction of estate claims in 1856 and 1857. Another question looms: Did the national liberal triumph, with its sanction of land privatization in the 1856 *Ley Lerdo*, play a role in the communities' defeat in court? Probably, and a comparative look at national developments might have revealed much here. Across Mexico, community resistance through riots and regional risings forced long delays in the privatization of

⁶ On colonial Yucatán, essential analysis begins with Nancy Farriss, *Maya Society in Colonial Yucatán* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984); continues with Robert Patch, *Maya and Spaniard in Yucatán, 1648-1812* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994) and *Maya Revolt and Revolution in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2002), and the many works of Matthew Restall grounded in Maya language sources, beginning with *The Maya World: Yucatec Culture and Society, 1550-1850* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997). Studies of the Caste War begin with Nelson Reed's classic, *The Caste War of Yucatán* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1964) and culminating in the innovative analyses of Terry Rugeley in *Yucatán's Maya Peasantry and the Origins of the Caste War* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), *Of Wonders and Wise Men: Religion and Popular Cultures in Southeast Mexico, 1800-1876* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001), and *Rebellion Now and Forever: Mayas, Hispanics, and Caste War Violence in Yucatán, 1800-1880* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009). Eiss notes much of this work, but does not plumb its depths—nor the contributions of so many Mexican and Yucatecan scholars whose would might have informed his analysis of the coming of Caste War violence.

community lands, despite the constitutional mandate of the 1850s.⁷ In Hunucmá it appears that failure to join the Caste War left the people of Hunucmá subject to early privatization. There is much to explore further here.

The core of the book, detailed in multiple chapter-episodes, engages the rise of the henequen export economy after 1870 and local resistance to it, the coming of the Mexican revolution in 1910 and the local conflicts within it, and the long and contested process of land reform, personal liberation, and community reconstruction that extended from 1915 through the 1930s. The local detail is exceptional, and for this key era of conflict and change Eiss does a better job of placing that detail in regional and national context.⁸ Every scholar of Yucatán and Mexico will learn by engaging these deep encounters with the people of Hunucmá, their participations in local challenges and national contests, and their insistence on contesting the understandings that so many attempted to impose on them. As Eiss insists, the communities of Hunucmá did not sit out the revolution, nor were they mere subjects to outsiders' impositions. They did everything they could via politics, violence, and the construction of meaning to make the revolution, its conflicts, and its promised reforms serve their interests. They were persistently active participants in the contests that transformed Yucatán and Mexico. Eiss also shows that their actions gained limited local benefits, never the transforming triumphs so often promised to el pueblo.

He emphasizes the drive of leading Yucatecan landlords and local Hunucmá elites to profit from the henequen economy, and how the boom restructured life and work across Hunucmá. Powerful and politically-connected growers allied with local entrepreneurs to press drive the export project. Eiss emphasizes that concentrations of land and power within communities were as important as the rising dominance of great capitalist enterprises during the years leading to 1910. In that regard, Hunucmá

⁷ The extensive work on this resistance, most by Mexican scholars, is synthesized in Romana Falcón, *Las naciones de una república* (Mexico City: Congreso de la Nación, 1999).

⁸ Here Eiss recognizes his debts to the exceptional work of Allen Wells and Gilbert Joseph, culminating in *Summer of Discontent, Seasons of Upheaval: Elite Politics and Rural Insurgency in Yucatán, 1876-1915* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996).

paralleled Morelos, as revealed in Felipe Ávila's transforming study of the origins of Zapatismo.⁹ Across Hunucmá land concentration and export development drew many to resident dependence as workers on henequen plantations. Others stayed in communities, struggling to survive by mixing cultivation, hunting, and forest extraction. Debates about who constituted el pueblo deepened, becoming divisive and often violent once the conflicts of revolution proliferated after 1910. The global economic changes stimulating and facilitating all this remain in the background.

On the long revolutionary era, Eiss offers unique detail setting local conflicts in the context of national developments. In exploring the crucible of 1914-15, when conflict in Hunucmá was drawn to the center of national struggles by the arrival of a Constitutionalist army claiming Yucatán for "the Revolution," a limited understanding of national conflicts limits analysis of the challenges faced by Hunucmá communities. Eiss sees revolutionary promises repeatedly blocked by a Constitutionalist commitment to henequen production. Why that contradiction marked the revolution in Hunucmá, and across Yucatán, might have been explored more thoroughly.

When the Constitutionlists (led by Venustiano Carranza) invaded Yucatán in the spring of 1915, they grasped for reinforcement in a struggle to displace the Conventionists (led by Emiliano Zapata and Pancho Villa) from national power. Desperate to rescue a faction on the verge of collapse, from early 1915 Carranza pursued a dual approach. He aimed to control the two commodities that generated revenues for Mexico in a world economy at war: petroleum (in Veracruz) and henequen (in Yucatán). And he claimed Zapata's ideology of land to villagers as his own in famous decrees of January 1915.¹⁰ Applied to regions around Mexico City, Carranza's agrarian program was a hypocritical ploy aimed to draw villagers away from Zapata. Imposed by an invading army in Yucatán, the same program was an

⁹ Felipe Ávila Espinosa, *Los origins del Zapatismo* (Mexico City: El Colegio de México, 2001)

¹⁰ Building on a generation of Mexican and international scholarship, I outlined this interpretation in John Tutino, "Revolutionary Confrontation, 1913-1917: Regional Factions, Class Conflicts, and the New National State," in Thomas Benjamin and Mark Wasserman, eds., *Provinces of the Revolution* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1990).

inevitably contradictory attempt to promise liberation and the return of land to communities by a faction adamantly committed to sustaining henequen production for export. The result: Carranza and the Constitutionlists consolidated national power and Hunucmá communities lived a “revolution” laden with destructive contradictions. Eiss sees the local brilliantly; the national and global factors driving local conflicts remain beyond view.

The Constitutionalist victory of 1915-1917 was premised on promising land and liberation to Yucatán’s communities—and on sustaining the henequen economy that generated revenues by supplying twine to mechanizing agriculture across the Mississippi basin and cordage to the navies of a Euro-Atlantic world caught in the Great War. That fundamental contradiction in the Constitutionalist approach to revolution set enduring limits on the potential for popular revolution in Yucatán. Hunucmá landlords and Constitutionalist generals agreed on the necessity of maintaining henequen exports. They disputed the profits and revenues. Landlords and Constitutionlists insisted that the people of Hunucmá labor to make henequen; they debated only how they should be drawn to that labor. Many in Hunucmá, in sharp contrast, fought to remake communities by taking lands out of export production and using them to sustain families and communities. Eiss details that contradiction in local detail, and explores the enduring conflicts it generated across Hunucmá.

Recognizing the importance of the contradictions of 1914-15, if not their full national and global dimensions, *In the Name of El Pueblo* goes on to detail years of contest in which communities demanded land and liberation, and regime builders promised both yet focused on forging power and taking revenues. There was creative contestation over the nature and meaning of El Pueblo—and endless local violence that tore at the fabric of community life. Eiss’s reporting of this era of promise and destruction is powerful. Had he engaged anthropologist Paul Friedrich’s searing studies of revolutionary risings followed by years of devastating internal violence in

Michoacán communities, he might have explored how Hunucmá pueblos faced local variants of widespread post-revolutionary challenges.¹¹

Eiss shows that the promise and contradictions of the revolutionary project in Hunucmá came to a head in 1937 with the great *deslinde*—a survey promoted by President Lázaro Cárdenas, undertaken to deliver long-promised lands to Yucatecan communities. As the conflicts of 1914 and 1915 were pivotal to the outcome of Mexico's revolution, Cárdenas' reforms set the course of the post-revolutionary nation. *In the Name of El Pueblo* details well the promise and limits of Cárdenas' *deslinde* in Hunucmá. Eiss recognizes the limits of Cárdenas' reforms in Yucatán, thanks to Ben Fallaw's fine analysis of Cardenismo in Yucatán.¹² Yet again, *In the Name of El Pueblo* misses key national and global dynamics. Engagement with classic studies of Cardenismo by Luis González y González and Nora Hamilton and the recent *tour de force* by Adolfo Gilly would have shown the reforming populist President grappling with the enduring contradictions left by the Constitutionalist triumph in the decade of revolution. Amid national conflicts and international powers in time of depression, Cárdenas implemented more reform—land distribution, labor rights, oil nationalization—than any Mexican leader before or since. Perhaps that is why so many Mexicans have constructed histories in which Cárdenas emerges a heroic man of the pueblos. Yet his efforts to bring meaningful reform were grounded in a larger project aimed to consolidate a national regime as global capitalism revived and the Atlantic world again hurtled toward war.¹³ Fundamental contradictions shaped not only Hunucmá, but Mexico as it grasped for a place in a changing world

Eiss concludes his chapter on Cárdenas' reforms with a long epilogue on the failure of land distribution to bring meaningful gains to Hunucmá communities—even as people continued to debate the rights and

¹¹ Paul Friedrich, *Agrarian Revolt in a Mexican Village* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1970); *The Princes of Naranja* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1987).

¹² Ben Fallaw, *Cárdenas Compromised: The Failure of Reform in Postrevolutionary Yucatán* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001)

¹³ Luis González y González, *Los días del Presidente Cárdenas* (Mexico City: El Colegio de México, 1981); Nora Hamilton, *The Limits of State Autonomy: Post-Revolutionary Mexico* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982); and Adolfo Gilly, *El cardenismo: una utopía mexicana* (Mexico City: Cal y Arena, 1994).

nature of El Pueblo. Again he is on target locally; and again, the analysis would be deeper had he explored the transforming changes that came to Yucatán and Mexico after 1940. Cárdenas' reforms aimed to consolidate the regime by offering limited social gains in Mexico as it was in the 1930s: a nation of fewer than 20,000,000 people, mostly rural, just beginning to urbanize, still working to industrialize. After 1940, population soared (tripling by 1970; quintupling by 2000), the nation rapidly urbanized, and production—including agriculture—industrialized.

Recording the failure of Cárdenas' reforms to revive Hunucmá communities without exploring the radical transformations underway there and across Mexico after 1940 leaves Cárdenas looking malignant, foolish, or both. Perhaps he was. But perhaps, too, he did what was possible for diverse communities while remaining committed to state-building in a time of deep national difficulties and limited global opportunities. When Mexico and the world changed in ways neither he nor the people of Hunucmá could have imagined in 1937, unprecedented and unforeseen challenges brought enduring conflicts and a deepening sense of failure—the latter nicely detailed by Eiss.

The final chapters of the book offer close explorations of local episodes that reveal much about community struggles and cultural constructions. We learn of the “War of the Eggs,” a labor conflict demanding better wages and work conditions in the chicken industry that had replaced henequen in much of Hunucmá by the early 1990s. The struggle, the defeat, and the taking control of historical memory are clearly recounted. Yet Eiss does not address how the conflict and the Salinas regime's intervention to ensure workers' defeat were part of a larger anti-union thrust that prepared Mexico and Yucatán for NAFTA.¹⁴ In the new trade bloc, Mexico was to provide cheap labor; local egg producers and the national state allied to ensure that labor would be cheap. The people of Hunucmá gained little in another attempt to build new lives and stronger communities; they did continue to construct their own histories.

¹⁴ See Dan La Botz, *Mask of Democracy: Labor Suppression in Mexico Today* (Boston: South End Press, 1999).

Eiss then turns to the deer hunts that continued to sustain devotion to Our Lady of Tetiz as NAFTA took effect in the 1990s. The dedication of the hunters in the face of state restrictions is clear; so is their continued commitment to honoring the Virgin. We also learn that Hunucmá communities and the festivals that integrate them are increasingly supported by funds sent by the younger men and women who go to labor in Los Angeles, Seattle, and elsewhere. Focusing intently on the local, Eiss does not explore the turn to transnational lives as a way to sustain communities—and inevitably to change them.

The final chapter-episode focuses on a teacher-historian, Anacleto Cetino Aguilar, who long participated in attempts to reform Mexico and to rebuild its communities. He worked for the revival and recognition of indigenous culture through *indigenismo*; he joined diverse struggles for popular reform; he supported the Zapatistas of Chiapas; he allied with the PAN to break the PRI monopoly of power. After all that, and seeing the limited gains his efforts brought, Cetino came home to write a history to honor and preserve local traditions and to teach youth that only through honoring tradition can they preserve El Pueblo. Eiss and Cetino know that many who have worked in Los Angeles do not share the teacher's views. Interviews with men and women who have lived in El Norte might have led Eiss to debates, local and scholarly, about the transnational extension and fragmentation facing Mexican communities, including many in Hunucmá. It is not clear whether communities are extending and changing to revive and endure, or stretching, breaking, and nearing collapse.¹⁵ These are challenges and uncertainties worth engaging.

After a long and illuminating journey through local history and the construction of local histories, Eiss comes to a clear conclusion. The people and communities of Hunucmá have struggled by diverse means to construct their own lives, communities, and understandings of both. They often failed to build the lives and communities they wanted, but repeatedly succeeded in constructing their own understandings through innovatively

¹⁵ For a sampling, see Michael Kearney, *Reconceptualizing the Peasantry* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1996); Robert Smith, *Mexican New York* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); and Judith Adler Hellman, *The World of Mexican Migrants* (New York: New Press, 2007).

crafted, if often-contested, histories. What have they accomplished? Eiss emphasizes that they have demonstrated the ability to say *no*, to refuse to accept what the powerful aimed to impose—and when it was imposed (even if limited by local resistance and negotiations), to insist on building their own resistant understandings of the imposition, the resistance, and their difficult adaptations.

This is an important conclusion, demonstrating that the people of Hunucmá were never marked by a “false consciousness.” They have not acquiesced in understandings promoted by the powerful that might limit the ability to resist, negotiate, and adapt to the forces that buffet their communities. Eiss builds on the work of James Scott, emphasizing subordinate communities’ production of hidden transcripts.¹⁶ Yet Eiss goes further, showing that Hunucmá communities created and debated visions that were rarely hidden. They forged alternative and often contrary transcripts that debated power and the meaning of community.

That conclusion opens a pivotal question: does the persistent ability to construct independent understandings support effective resistance to the powers that continue to plague Hunucma’s communities? Or does it shape a limited domain of cultural autonomy that cushions, perhaps even facilitates, the structures of power and dependence that restrict community options and family opportunities?¹⁷

The people of Hunucmá continue to say *no* and to construct local identities and histories. Does that facilitate an effective ability to negate the impositions of regional elites, national power players, and globalizing market forces? Or does it ease accommodations to powers that do not budge? This is the challenge left by *In the Name of El Pueblo*: It is a history that documents conflicts and cultural creativities within communities buffeted by local, national and global powers. The communities persist in cultural agency, even as effective social and political action faces deepening constraints. It is a challenge that can be explored best by placing local

¹⁶ He cites Scott’s *Weapons of the Weak* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987)

¹⁷ In *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University press, 1990), Scott builds on Eugene Genovese’s classic *Roll, Jordan, Roll* (New York: Pantheon, 1972), which worries explicitly that cultural autonomy may facilitate power rather than challenge it.

analysis in comparative perspective and within national and global fields of power.

Eiss is not the first to conclude that the struggles of the twentieth century left Mexican communities with the clarity and ability to say no—but little chance to construct the lives and communities they seek. Arturo Warman titled his probing study of Morelos communities in the aftermath of Zapata's revolution: *Y venimos a contradecir*—in English, *We Come to Object*.¹⁸ He explored local struggles as the Mexican regime changed in the face of national and global economic transformations. He honored villagers' local understandings. He saw the continuing impositions of the powerful, the persistent adaptations of Morelos communities, and their repeated objections. Guillermo de la Peña wrote a parallel anthropological history of Morelos' highland villages in the same era. His title says everything: *Herederos de promesas*.¹⁹

Eiss might have approached a new analytic synthesis had he engaged Paul Friedrich's exploration of how the promise and frustration of land reform in Michoacán led to a destructive history of intra-community violence and Warman's and de la Peña's analyses of how utopian promises, limited reforms, population explosions, and new incorporations in globalizing markets left Morelos villagers with the voice to object—but little capacity to force change to benefit families and communities.

Here is the limit of Eiss's in many ways excellent book—a work that has clearly set me thinking. He knows the complex history of Hunucmá and its changing communities exceptionally well; the parallel histories of other Mexican communities and the larger history they have contested simultaneously remain beyond his horizon. He recognizes Luis González y González' *Pueblo en vilo* as a pioneer local history; yet dismisses it as not seeing the community in the larger nation and world. Eiss insists that “communalism” cannot “stand outside capital or the state.” Yet it is in seeing the engagement of Hunucmá communities with capital and the state that *In the Name of el Pueblo* remains limited. *Pueblo en vilo* sees San José

¹⁸ Spanish original: (Mexico City, La Casa Chata, 1976); English translation: (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980).

¹⁹ (Mexico City: La Casa Chata, 1980) English version: *A Legacy of Promises* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1982)

de Gracia in the context of the coming of the commercial economy under Porfirio Diaz, the impact of revolution, Cristero resistance, agrarian reform, the opening to a wider world in World War II, and the impact of migration to the US, all in a work completed in the 1960s. Eiss might have followed that lead and engaged other key studies, often by Mexican scholars, to offer a more comparative vision of Hunucmá communities in national context.

The people of Hunucmá will continue to construct their own understandings of community and of their uncertain places in a changing world. That Paul Eiss has demonstrated. Whether cultural autonomy will enable social and political assertions and help people build more bearable lives remains to be seen. Eiss documents how the people of Hunucmá—after their quiescence in the Caste War—repeatedly mobilized to claim land, better ways of labor, and other material foundations to enhance community life. The gains have been limited, the prospects uncertain. It will require the integration of studies of pueblos in diverse regions, all facing the Mexican state and a globalizing economy, to understand the challenges that constrain so many Mexican communities. Paul Eiss has provided a deep local analysis of cultural autonomy that will contribute in essential ways to that larger exploration. We await a comparative analysis to help us understand the limits of community autonomy beyond the domain of culture.