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Review/Reseña

Adolfo Gilly. *The Mexican Revolution: A People's History*. Trans. Patrick Camiller. (New York: The New Press, 2005)

From Marxism to Social History: Adolfo Gilly's Revision of *The Mexican Revolution*

Luis F. Ruiz

University of Oregon

Adolfo Gilly's *The Mexican Revolution*, published in The New Press's series *A People's History*, directed by Howard Zinn, is an updated translation of his influential book *La Revolución interrumpida*, published originally in 1971. Gilly's book is a welcome addition to the available literature in English on the Mexican Revolution. Most of the recent books on the Mexican Revolution are either specialized studies of regional history or extensive volumes

that would overwhelm a good number of undergraduate students and lay readers. With the exception of Michael J. Gonzales's *The Mexican Revolution 1910-1940* (2002), few works in English provide the kind of useful overview presented by Gilly in *The Mexican Revolution* (2005).

Because Gilly focuses on the lower classes and their role as “prime movers” of the revolutionary movement, his work could be described as a bottom-up social history of the Mexican Revolution. His study of class warfare and class relations provides a reasonable interpretation of the complex revolutionary process. Although recent studies on regionalism have made the overall narrative of the Mexican Revolution less succinct and more problematic, historians still need to discuss the event as a whole. Gilly's work offers one possible interpretive framework for the Mexican Revolution. Gilly's new book suggests that the Mexican Revolution was a class-based struggle carried out primarily by the lower classes that rebelled against the exploitative capitalist system of the Porfiriato. He explains how the Porfirian hacendados seized the lands inhabited by indigenous communities and then forced peons into a harsh labor system that resembled slavery.¹ The loss of land and the unbearable working conditions prompted many peasants to join the popular uprisings led by Emiliano Zapata and Pancho Villa. According to Gilly, the Revolution was a struggle between the subaltern classes (led by Zapata and Villa) and the bourgeoisie (led by Madero, Huerta, and Carranza). Although the initial revolutionary movement against Porfirio Díaz included a multi-class alliance—rural peasants, dissident elites, intellectuals, unemployed workers, and the ruined

¹ The concentration of hacienda lands was facilitated by (a) the advent of commercial (capitalist) agriculture and (b) two nineteenth-century land reforms: Ley Lerdo and the 1883 Law of Colonization. These two laws allowed the state to resell all communally-owned lands to individuals. The problem was that the only individuals who could afford the state's prices were the wealthy hacendados. As a result, a privileged minority controlled most of Mexico's land throughout the Porfiriato.

middle class—Gilly argues that the Revolution was driven and sustained by the subaltern classes. Gilly believes that without the resilience and determination of the peasant rebels, the bourgeois forces of Francisco I. Madero and Venustiano Carranza would have restored the Porfirian system once the dictator had been deposed. His main argument is that “the Mexican people,” the revolutionary masses, through their effort and commitment, were responsible for the political and socio-economic changes brought forth by the Mexican Revolution.

The Constitutional army defeated the rebel peasants because the popular movements failed to create a unified national program. The outcome of the Revolution, however, was neither a unanimous victory for the old Porfirian bourgeoisie nor a resounding defeat for the peasants. The postrevolutionary regime of Alvaro Obregón represented the petty bourgeoisie, a new class that acquired political power but needed to consolidate its hegemonic control by establishing “new relations of domination with the masses” (2005: 339). Gilly suggests that the social progress achieved by “the people” prevented the postrevolutionary state from ruling with absolute impunity. This conclusion ties *The Mexican Revolution* (2005) to recent historiographical debates on hegemony and subaltern studies.

Gilly’s social history methodology, however, marks a slight departure from his earlier work. In the first edition of this book, published in 1971,² Gilly applied a rigid Marxist methodology to the study of the Revolution. Gilly argued that the Mexican Revolution “was interrupted in its course towards socialism” (1971: 392) and suggested that the popular movements led by Zapata and Villa represented the first stage of a permanent revolution that would inevitably conclude with the rise of socialism. The leftist presidency

² Adolfo Gilly, *La revolución interrumpida, México, 1910-1920; una guerra campesina por la tierra y el poder* (Mexico City: Ediciones “El caballito”, 1971).

of Lázaro Cárdenas (1934-1940)—which carried out an important land redistribution program and promoted socialist education—represented the second stage of the permanent revolution. The problem was that the revolutionary process was thwarted, or “interrupted,” by the Bonapartist state which took power first in 1920 and again after Cárdenas’s presidency in 1940.

To explain his theory of the interrupted revolution, Gilly focused on Zapata’s peasant army in Morelos. He believed that the Zapatistas set forth the path towards socialism because they (a) developed an advanced class consciousness, (b) advocated an anti-capitalist economy and (c) refused to put down their weapons unless the government redistributed the land fairly among the peasant communities. The peasant rebels were nonetheless defeated by the Constitutionalist army of Carranza and Obregón, and the Revolution failed to fulfill the goals laid out by the Zapatistas. Yet, Gilly insisted that the consciousness and revolutionary spirit of the Zapatistas remained alive well after the violent period of the Revolution (1910-1920). “The crease that [Zapata] opened was never closed” (1971: 81). Although the movement was interrupted by Obregón’s opportunistic Bonapartist regime, the Zapatistas had already built the foundation for the second stage of the permanent revolution. According to Marx, a Bonapartist regime was, by definition, temporary. Hence, Gilly predicted that the proletariat would inevitably take up the Zapatista cause in order to complete the Revolution and establish socialism in Mexico.

In a chapter from *La revolución interrumpida* (1971) entitled “Cardenismo,” Gilly argued that Cárdenas fulfilled the ideals of the Revolution because his regime finally redistributed the land to the peasantry, organized the labor movement, nationalized the oil and railroad industries, and developed a socialist education program (1971: 351). The rise of Cardenismo indicated that the Bonapartist regime, which acted in the interest of the bourgeoisie, had been

subdued and that the second stage of the permanent revolution had been completed. Gilly claimed that Cardenismo brought Mexico one step closer to socialism. He even interpreted the arrival of Leon Trotsky to Mexico as a sign of Cardenas's goal to "establish a relationship with the roots of the Soviet revolution, with the Lenin and Trotsky era" (1971: 377).

Gilly wrote *La revolución interrumpida* (1971) while serving a six-year sentence in Mexico City's Lecumberri prison. Gilly, a man of the left who participated in several revolutionary movements throughout Latin America, was imprisoned for breaking the "Law of Social Dissolution."³ *La revolución interrumpida* appeared at a time when Mexico's population was disillusioned with its government. The PRI, Mexico's ruling party, established its legitimacy by portraying itself as the product of the Revolution, but after the 1968 massacre at Tlatelolco intellectuals like Gilly began to question the legitimacy of Mexico's corrupt and abusive government. Because the state remained intrinsically tied to the Mexican Revolution, the memory of the Revolution became darker and less appealing. With *La revolución interrumpida*, Gilly therefore aimed to "return the revolution to the people" (1971: ix). Gilly developed a new interpretation of the Revolution, one in which the people played the role of protagonists. The book was immensely popular among lay readers and scholars. "Thousands of copies were sold in spite of the fact that the author was being held in jail. It was adopted as an official textbook by many faculties of history in Mexico."⁴ *La revolución interrumpida* reinvigorated scholarship on the Mexican Revolution. Its impact was so great that even in 1995 Luis Anaya

³ See Friedrich Katz, "Foreword," in Gilly's *The Mexican Revolution* (2005), x-xi; Sheldon Liss, *Marxist Thought in Latin America* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), 235-236.

⁴ Katz, "Foreword," x.

Merchant would say that Gilly's interpretation of the Revolution was still one of the most widely accepted in Mexico.⁵

While *La revolución interrumpida* (1971) achieved much success in Mexico and Latin America, Mexicanist historians in the US and Britain were less impressed with it. One of the foremost scholars of the Mexican Revolution, Alan Knight, criticized Gilly's work and that of other Marxist historians for (a) being too schematic and (b) lacking original archival research.⁶ Knight observed that the use of Marxist categories to define class caused Gilly to lump heterogeneous groups together under the revolutionary rubric.⁷ As a result, Knight suggested, Gilly oversimplified the differences and antagonisms among certain groups. For example, Gilly placed Madero, Carranza, and Huerta under the single label of "bourgeoisie" and argued that the three successive presidents defended a bourgeois agenda. Although partially true, this statement does not acknowledge that Huerta, Carranza, and Madero, at different points of the Revolution, fought with and/or against each other. Knight's critique of *La revolución interrumpida* sheds light on a broader reaction to Marxism that many English-based scholars have had since the 1980s.

The new English-language edition of Gilly's book presents a more plausible analysis of the Mexican Revolution, one that would not be hindered by the rigidity of certain Marxist categories and concepts.⁸ It no longer adheres, for instance, to the Trotskyite concept of permanent revolution, nor does it insist on the teleological conclusion that the Revolution must lead to socialism. Gilly still

⁵ Luis Anaya Merchant, "La construcción de la memoria y la revisión de la revolución," *Historia Mexicana*, 44, 4 (1995): 535.

⁶ Alan Knight, "Interpretaciones recientes de la Revolución mexicana." *Secuencia*, 13, (1989): 30.

⁷ Alan Knight, "The Mexican Revolution: Bourgeois? Nationalist? Or just a 'Great Rebellion?'" *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, 4, 2 (1985): 2.

⁸ In the first English translation of *La revolución interrumpida*, published in 1983, Gilly did not modify his Marxist interpretation. See *The Mexican Revolution*, translated by Patrick Camiller (London: Verso Editions and New Left Books, 1983).

describes the Zapatista movement as an assault on capitalism, but he does not refer to Zapatismo as the path towards socialism: “Zapata’s ideas sprang from the peasantry, not from a socialist program” (2005: 73). Gilly calls Zapatismo anti-capitalist because the peasants fought against the wealthy sugar estates which profited from commercial agriculture in a capitalist economy.

If Zapatismo no longer represents the first stage in the permanent revolution, then there is no sense in discussing the second stage: he has therefore omitted the chapter on Cárdenas’s presidency that he had written for *La revolución interrumpida*. Removing the teleological assumption about Zapatismo is only the first of several important revisions that Gilly made for this new translation. In addition, he removed the appendix where he explained the logic of the Marxist interpretation, and revised the conclusions to several of the chapters.⁹ Gilly also edited certain parts to avoid the generalizations of Marxist jargon. For example, to describe Pancho Villa’s movement, Gilly refers to the members of the Northern Division as “the urban working class” (2005: 148) while in previous editions he had used the more generic term of “proletarians” (1983: 147). Gilly makes a more significant revision to the conclusion of the chapter on the “Morelos Commune.” The 1983 translation stated that the Zapatista commune “is the finest and most deeply rooted tradition which can serve for the continuation of Mexico’s interrupted revolution up to the achievement of a workers’ and peasants’ government” (1983: 294). The 2005 edition, on the other hand, does not make a blatant assumption about the future of

⁹ *La revolución interrumpida* (1971) featured a section—which Gilly planned to use as an introduction—where he outlined the reasons why the Marxist interpretation was more convincing than the one offered by official history, the bourgeoisie, and petty bourgeoisie. In the 1983 translation, Gilly replaced the original appendix with an essay that he had written in 1979 for a volume called *Interpretaciones de la revolución mexicana*. The 1979 essay expanded his idea of Zapatismo as the vanguard of Mexico’s socialist future. Neither of these appendices are part of *The Mexican Revolution* (2005).

the Zapatismo. Instead, Gilly writes a more neutral, yet strangely ambiguous, statement: “The Morelos Commune remains one of the finest and most deeply rooted Mexican revolutionary traditions. It continues to come back time and again” (2005: 297). Perhaps Gilly is referring to the neo-Zapatista movement (EZLN) in Chiapas that began in 1994, but he never clarifies this point. Finally, Gilly ends *The Mexican Revolution* (2005) not with an appendix on Marxism, or with a chapter on Cardenismo, but with an epilogue that reaffirms his argument about the subaltern classes as the protagonists of the Revolution.

Without the theory of interrupted revolution, the idea of a temporary Bonapartist state, or the teleological assumptions about the march towards socialism, what is left of Gilly’s Marxist approach to the Mexican Revolution? His revisions have clearly removed some of the most obvious unworkable aspects of Marxist theory. The idea of the Mexican Revolution as interrupted, for example, no longer makes much sense. How could a movement that began in 1910 and ended (at the latest) in 1940, continue its struggle in the twenty-first century? And yet, Gilly does not completely eliminate Marxism from his theoretical arsenal. He still relies on a Marxist vocabulary to describe the different Mexican social classes: bourgeois, petty bourgeois, the masses, and the proletariat. He still characterizes the Revolution as a class struggle between the masses and the armies supported by the bourgeoisie. Gilly opens his 2005 epilogue with a reference to Lenin and Trotsky and uses their definition of a revolution as a framework for his interpretation of the Mexican Revolution.

For Lenin and Trotsky, then, a revolution is essentially defined by the manifold intervention of the masses to decide the whole fate of society. The program, leadership, and outcome are naturally important, as is the idea its actors form of the events. But the key is the irruption into history of the broadest masses, the most exploited, oppressed, and muted in times of calm and stability (2005: 328).

Gilly upholds this definition of revolution because it fits his argument that the oppressed and exploited masses determined the course of the Mexican Revolution.

The book is not without its flaws. The most glaring weakness of *The Mexican Revolution* (2005) is that it fails to incorporate, or even debate, the seminal works on the Revolution that have been written since 1983.¹⁰ Gilly claims that his book “is not a work of investigation, but of reflection of what has been investigated and recounted” (2005: v). Nonetheless, a successful work of synthesis should address the recent important contributions to the field. Otherwise, the synthesis will seem outdated. The intellectual debates regarding the Mexican Revolution have dramatically changed its contours in the past thirty-five years, yet Gilly continues to frame his argument around certain issues—such as the fallacy of official history—that have lost relevance since the 1970s. *La revolución interrumpida* (1971) developed an alternative interpretation of history which opposed and criticized the official version endorsed by the state. Gilly’s argument was innovative and controversial in the 1970s, but since then new studies on the Mexican Revolution have taken the debate in different directions, and these new interpretations deserve to be part of an updated synthesis. Gilly’s revision of the Marxist methodology certainly makes his thesis more plausible, but he does not discuss how this revised method compares with the influential work of Alan Knight, John Mason Hart, and Friedrich Katz.¹¹ For comparison’s sake, the 1983 translation

¹⁰ Some of the key works include: Alan Knight’s *The Mexican Revolution* (1986), John Mason Hart’s *Revolutionary Mexico* (1987), Friedrich Katz’s *The Life and Times of Pancho Villa* (1998), Michael J. Gonzales’s *The Mexican Revolution 1910-1940* (2002), and the essays in Gilbert Joseph and Daniel Nugent eds. *Everyday Forms of State Formation* (1994).

¹¹ Curiously enough, Friedrich Katz wrote a laudatory foreword for the 2005 edition, yet Gilly does not mention how Katz’s groundbreaking book *The Life and Times of Pancho* (1998) influenced his own interpretation of Pancho Villa and

featured an updated list of sources which acknowledged the historiographical changes that occurred between 1971 and 1983.¹² The same cannot be said for the 2005 edition.

Although *The Mexican Revolution* (2005) presents an outdated synthesis of the Mexican Revolution, Gilly's work remains an important interpretive model. The revised Marxist methodology allows Gilly to analyze Zapatismo without having to commit to an unsubstantiated teleological conclusion, such as the inevitable rise of socialism in Mexico. Gilly wisely removes the concept of the interrupted revolution because the social and political conditions in Mexico have changed in the past few decades. If another revolution occurs in Mexico, it would be a new and independent movement, and not a continuation of the 1910 Revolution. Gilly does not entirely expunge Marxism from his method; he merely revises its place within his narrative. Instead of forcing the Mexican Revolution into a rigid Marxist theory, Gilly partially relies on Marxism to construct the main premise of his book: the masses (the people) shaped the history of the Revolution.

the Villista movement. Gilly does refer to Katz's earlier work *The Secret War* (1981) and "La servidumbre agraria" (1976), although these references were made originally for the 1983 edition.

¹² Gilly added material, among others, from Hector Aguilar Camín's *La frontera nomada: Sonora y la revolución mexicana* (1977), Michael Meyer's *Huerta: A Political Biography* (1972), and Katz's pre-1983 work.

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