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## Review/Reseña

Paul Hart. *Bitter Harvest: The Social Transformation of Morelos, Mexico, and the Origins of the Zapatista Revolution, 1840-1910*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2005.

### **From Campesino to Worker: Agrarian Change in Nineteenth-Century Mexico**

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In his search for origins of the Zapatista rebellion of 1910, Paul Hart traces a century of agrarian transformation in the Mexican State of Morelos. It is, fundamentally, the painful story of the slow but inexorable privatization of common lands to commercial agriculture, the transition of self-sufficient (if poor and suffering) peasants into independent workers for capitalistic enterprise. Then, a

sudden economic downturn interrupts the trajectory, workers recall old grievances and stress new ones, and armed protest ensues demanding traditional rights and fulfillment of newer promises made by modernizing government. This is an old story that bears revisiting and is well-told here by Hart.

Much of the material is familiar—native people in their communal arrangements, the impact of the Ley Lerdo and foreign invasions, Porfirian dedication to development—but special conditions in Morelos add more complexity to the mix, for instance, the state’s relatively large Black and mulatto population, and, of course, its reliance on sugar production. Hart, moreover, digs deeply into local archives to indicate municipal diversity in the state. Overall, however, his total reliance on controversial theories such as dependency, social banditry, subaltern, and class struggle to support his arguments robs the book of the nuances and diversity the subject deserves. For example, an hacendado’s largesse in providing clothing and medical assistance to his workers is seen as a reflection of “an old semi-feudal idea of reciprocity and mutual expectations between workers and employers on the estates” (172). Moreover, generalizations that in the late nineteenth-century campesinos, as a whole, held a worldview “that saw extreme social inequalities exacerbated by repeated local abuses and nepotism, and supported by institutional injustices and corruption” seems overdrawn, monolithic and hard to prove, as is their “desire for popular democracy and for equal treatment under the law” (181). Some campesinos, perhaps many, had such thoughts on their minds, but many did not. If anything, recent studies of rural communities show how split they were in worldview, current concerns, their historical past, and what to do (if anything) about their future.

Hart (from his point of view) deftly traces sea changes in campesino thinking and hopes, desires and demands overtime. His is a laudable endeavor, clearly expressed, worthy of attention and

debate. Following the nation's Independence, native villages (protected by colonial mandate) sought to maintain the status quo, but mestizo and mulatto pueblos, sensing their ambiguous position between Indians and creoles, began to agitate for land and local governance. By mid-century, Mexico had lost a war with the United States (which discredited the national government), seen Liberals promulgate a new constitution expressing their vision of a modernized country, lapsed into civil war and suffered a French Intervention, all of which are said to have led more nationalistic and independently-minded agrarians to insist upon community autonomy and social justice, the protection of their land and local rights, and seek recognition by the national government and its elite supporters as full-fledged citizens of the republic.

The Morelos countryside, meanwhile, had started to capitalize and agrarians began their long march from campesinos to workers, that is, communal and free farmers into employees for the sugar estates. As hacendados and merchants responded to larger developments in industry, commerce and export agriculture, "the new political economy pointed toward the beginning of class, rather than caste, society" (135), a process exacerbated by Porfirian programs labeled "progress."

Sugar industrialists in Morelos took advantage of the government's drive to industrialize Mexico by expanding production. Increasing the size of their estates, they infringed more crassly than ever on the property rights of others, mainly poor and defenseless individuals as well as communal lands of pueblos, some of them embedded within haciendas. Protests went largely unheeded. Many campesinos became workers on sugar haciendas; others became beholden to the Big Estates through sharecropping, rental, and other less formal arrangements. Plentiful jobs and more than occasional oppression shrouded a booming sugar business in perceived peace, but the worm turned.

By 1900, sugar production exceeded domestic demand, forcing producers into export markets. Fierce Cuban competition limited success, and a worldwide recession in 1907 cut trade everywhere. With its industry in a severe slump, estates in Morelos laid off workers in droves, discontent recalled old grievances, and when in 1909 the Porfiristas frustrated a popular choice for governor and imposed their own candidate on the state, the fuse of revolt was lit.

On November 20<sup>th</sup>, 1910, the Mexican Revolution burst out in the north. Nearly four months later, Zapatistas erupted in Morales. Why they delayed so long is not discussed in the book, but once into the struggle, they fought doggedly, making land reform—the redistribution of real estate, water, and other wealth—their main goal. Various proposals for redistribution developed, some more radical than others, but with Emiliano Zapata dead, and much of the internecine fighting ended, the country's new president, Alvaro Obregón, initiated a massive, land redistribution program. Hart presumes he did so because of campesino pressure from below, but he could have been building a broader political base for himself. Or perhaps both, as they are not incompatible.

And the struggle goes on, as evidenced by the more recent Zapatista uprising in the far southern state of Chiapas on which the final curtain has not yet fallen.

This brief overview of Paul Hart's book lacks, of necessity, many of the interesting and illuminating details and dramatic vignettes he discovered in his comprehensive research. His discussion of the Junta Protectora of Maximilian, for example, is excellent. These alone make the book a valuable addition to Mexican agrarian history. Every author writes from a point of view, which is as it should be. But many of Hart's observations and arguments about Mexico's agrarian history have been pondered, debated, dissected, and nuanced elsewhere and found to be fascinating,

maddening, unfathomable, challenging, and worthy of more study and thought. Hart mentions some of this give-and-take in footnotes, but they do not much influence his text, which (in my opinion) leaves these essential issues mired in too much spin. On the other hand, welcome, Paul, to the discussion and thank you for your meaningful contribution.