A Contra corriente
Una revista de historia social y literatura de América Latina
A Contra corriente
A Journal on Social History and Literature in Latin America
Vol. 4, No. 3, Spring 2007, 234-238
www.ncsu.edu/project/acontracorriente

Reseña/Review

Jocelyn Olcott, *Revolutionary Women in Postrevolutionary Mexico*
Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006.

Gender and Citizenship in Cardenista México

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Jocelyn Olcott's insightful monograph, *Revolutionary Women in Postrevolutionary Mexico*, expands our understanding of women's activism and popular mobilization during the Lázaro Cárdenas years. In this period, the meanings of Mexican femininity and the rights and responsibilities of citizenship became contested discourses through which some Mexican women sought to construct a postrevolutionary society that addressed their needs. The women

Olcott investigates were the "progressive[s] and radical[s]" who, while not necessarily representing the majority of Mexican women at the time, "helped define postrevolutionary political culture" (3). Olcott situates the work of these activists, including women as diverse as Mexico City feminists with international connections and women from a mining community in Coahuila, within the widespread popular mobilizations that characterized the Cárdenas presidency. Her careful conclusions are drawn from extensive archival research in Mexico City, Michoacán, Coahuila, Durango, Yucatán, Veracruz, Nuevo León, Puebla and the United States, as well as various interviews. Three illustrative case studies highlight how Mexico's vast regional differences affected the implementation, acceptance and understanding of Cárdenas's reforms.

After the introduction's sophisticated reading of the notions of gender and "revolutionary citizenship" for the Mexican context, chapter one analyses the First Feminist Congress in Yucatán (1916), discussing the fundamental disagreements, not only about ideology but about what being a woman actually meant, that would divide the women's movement then and in later decades. As the volume defines *Cardenismo* broadly (from 1928, when Cárdenas became governor of Michoacán, to 1940, when he left the presidency), chapter two analyses the repercussions of the church-state conflict on women's activism, in Michoacán. Chapter three examines the wide-sweep of the women's movement in the 1930s, focusing particularly on the teachers and activists of the Popular Front who sought to unify the movement. Moving north, chapter four examines how labor conflicts in the Comarca Lagunera shaped women's mobilization in that region. After having established the breadth, diversity and vibrancy of women's mobilization, in chapter five, Olcott turns to the traditional demand of early feminists: suffrage. Closing the volume, chapter six shows how, in Yucatán, women activists and their

priorities were particularly vulnerable to the combustible interactions between local and federal agencies.

Throughout the volume, Olcott is concerned with the contingent and changing meanings of citizenship after the revolution. Although the revolution had been partially fought for the goals of "effective suffrage, no reelection," postrevolutionary reality meant that voting rights were considered only a small component of how citizenship was understood, exercised and experienced. Olcott argues that, for many women, suffrage was a secondary consideration compared to other potential benefits of the revolution, such corn mills to ease the heavy burden of tortilla making or rights to land. For both men and women, revolutionary citizenship, then, was not an abstract, universal concept but "a set of social, cultural, and political processes that both shaped and refracted contemporary political discourses and practices" (6).

The Michoacán case study offers an interesting example of the influence that regional and local political cultures had on women's activism and demands as citizens. Even as that state was still reeling from the bitter Cristero War, Governor Cárdenas promoted women's temperance and welfare groups, with an eye to undermining the activism of both Catholics and the Communist party. Cárdenas's gubernatorial programs acted as pilot projects for future national policy. For women's organizations, working within the Cárdenas state offered concrete benefits, always threatened by the dangers of such an alliance: co-optation and political retribution if Cárdenas fell from grace. Women's organizing in Michoacán, and the problems that these activists faced, foreshadow the risks that the women's movement faced at a national level once Cárdenas became president.

By the mid-1930s, this activism and the more progressive climate, mixed with greater official attention to women's demands, meant that women's rights moved into the political mainstream. Women seemed assured of receiving suffrage rights under Cárdenas,

yet, through the exploitation of a technicality, the constitutional amendment that passed through the state legislatures was never implemented. Olcott successfully challenges the traditional interpretation of this failure, that women were denied suffrage because of fears about their Catholicism and innate conservatism. Yet she does not offer a satisfying alternative theory, suggesting that politicians may have seen women as a threat to traditional patronage politics and that the vote was less important to Mexicans than other forms of acting out citizenship. Perhaps, considering how close Mexican women came to suffrage in 1938-39, no explanation of its failure would be satisfying.

One of the monograph's greatest contributions to the literature comes from Olcott's constant respect for how politics at local, regional and national level turn in different directions and at different speeds, yet constantly interacting, like the inner workings of a clock. Olcott's nuanced sense of this relationship, in which movement is sometimes counterintuitive, is only possible because she deftly manages these multiple stories at all levels, using vivid examples and insightful analysis. Occasionally, the lack of a single narrative or chronology is confusing, yet her structure offers the benefit that each of the chapters stands on its own, while building an impressive array of evidence to support her conclusions. Using her case studies, Olcott demonstrates how citizenship and its meanings depended on local and regional histories, especially in the case of women, for whom citizenship was always contingent. Olcott concludes that, "women activists' postrevolutionary experience demonstrates that it mattered not only who held the presidency but also who held state and local offices" (236). For women, not yet full citizens who could vote out uncooperative or obstructive officials, informal politics and a sympathetic politician were key to gaining concrete benefits. This discussion about women activists' attempts to shape postrevolutionary society teaches us a great deal about how the

Cárdenas government and Mexicans negotiated the revolution in practice.