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### **Review/Reseña**

Will Fowler, editor, *Celebrating Insurrection: The Commemoration and Representation of the Nineteenth-Century Mexican Pronunciamiento*. Lincoln and Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2012.

### **The Lonely Mexican?**

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One maxim we are all acquainted with holds that there is a grain of truth to every prejudiced view. Latin American history past and present seems to constantly spawn them, but spawn what? Grains of truth or prejudices? Or just to confirm prejudices? These are the questions at the center of Will Fowler's last installment on nineteenth century Mexican *pronunciamientos*. The pronunciamiento can be thought of as a "revolution of sorts," a movement calling for a revolution against a

government considered oppressive. The leaders were referred to as *pronunciados*, and incidentally, so were those who followed in whatever capacity. Such boisterous and short-lived revolutions were not unique to Mexico, either, but a common fixture of nineteenth century Latin America.

*Celebrating Insurrection* is the type of historiographical contribution to be valued for its cutting edge research and its merit as a teaching tool in courses either on Mexico or Latin American history. The eleven plus one introductory chapters are short, cover the different regions of Mexico, and chronologically anchor their narratives in the first decade of the nineteenth century through the 1870s. The collection of essays poses questions that defy easy categorization as only relevant to social or cultural dynamics. Ultimately, Flower's work addresses key historical concerns with change and continuity over time. In particular, how did these revolutions "of sorts" (253) affect embryonic notions of a Mexican identity at a time when such a notion was itself evolving? How were cycles of revolutionary or forced changes in government digested by the body politic and what have been the consequences?

Traditional historiography has ignored these kinds of questions, which makes Fowler's book a must-read. In particular, those who specialize in or teach independence and early-republican eras in Latin America will find this book groundbreaking. Such a view is not recent in genesis nor common to the American academy. Melissa Boyd's essay (chapter 7), "Contemporary verdicts on the *pronunciamiento* during the early national period," explores the meaning and practice of *pronunciamientos* from the perspective of contemporary (nineteenth century) society. In passing, other essays touch upon the disruption to people's daily routines, as well. For example, in Pedro Santoni's essay (chapter 6), "*Salvas, cañonazos, y repiques*: celebrating the *pronunciamiento* during the U.S.-Mexican War," some Mexico City residents showed themselves apathetic to the revolving-door coup d'états during the latter half of the 1840s. A local publication at the time remarked that a number of churches remained silent by not tolling their bells. Everyone was expected to show his or her solidarity and if not—what did it say about such inconformity? Clearly, then, as a political practice to address specific problems, nineteenth society held an

ambivalent attitude about the act of *pronunciarse* (to declare oneself in open rebellion); yet pronunciamientos continued (or persisted?).

The dual nature behind the practice of *pronunciarse* provides us with a historical exercise in interpretation that remains controversial. Such an exercise then can make for a great teaching moment in the classroom. The practice of “pronouncing oneself in open rebellion” was both a means to express dissatisfaction with an established political order and grassroots legitimation for such political convulsions. It was in this regard, that pronunciamientos became a political necessity. However, pronunciamientos were also an obstacle toward political stability. In short, it was this type of politically contradictory behavior that created such social repercussions and in turn reaffirmed the role of force over debate in political life.

The book is structured to contrast national and local vistas of Mexican political life in chapters one through three; the introductory essay and the concluding chapter provide an overall historiographical discussion as well as an analysis of accounts by Mexicans and non-Mexicans. In fact, all of these essays (introduction, chapters 1-2, and concluding chapter) assembled by Fowler, frame the overall intellectual project by reminding us how popular or overly intellectualized perceptions can inform how scholars and governments understand socio-political phenomena.

The constant struggle between the need to simplify and analyze complexity is what informs the first two chapters. These two essays, by Rodrigo Moreno Gutiérrez and Rirchard A. Warren, discuss the one transcendental pronunciamiento in republican Mexican history. The Plan de Iguala paved the way for a politically negotiated intra- and inter-class agreement to separate New Spain from Spain in 1821. At the head of this movement was turncoat military officer Agustín de Iturbide who, not long after, in 1822, was crowned emperor of Mexico. At least more than book I have read about this turbulent period in Mexican history seems to implicate Iturbide in creating a holding pattern for the remainder of the nineteenth century until the beginning Porfirio Díaz’s dictatorship in 1876.<sup>1</sup> One

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<sup>1</sup> For an alternative assessment of the First Empire, see: Michael C. Meyer, William L. Sherman, and Susan M. Deeds, *The Course of Mexican History*, 7<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York and Oxford: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 292.

pronunciamiento followed another, with the pronunciado(s) taking over only to find himself (or themselves) fending off waves of pronunciados and their pronunciamientos. Even those who criticized the pronunciamiento as mob politics inviting greater political disintegration were not above using this political institution to advance the cause of a more stable republic.

The next three chapters (three to five; by Rosie Doyle, Kerry McDonald, and Shara Ali, respectively) take the focus away from Mexico City toward regional or local politics. It is at the level of state politics that we see how pronunciamientos can be both highly disruptive of the established status quo and can also be used by the same establishment to advance or stall change. This is because municipal- or state-level contexts provided small-scale social laboratories within which to attempt to integrate or rebel against pronunciamiento specifics. But given the absence of an ideal which could further cement or isolate these local developments, instead local politics became as unstable as those associated with the central government. In pointing out the cyclical nature of pronunciamiento politics, even at regional levels, these three authors help chronicle a crucial transition in nineteenth century political life. We begin to understand how the colonial practice of pressuring authorities to listen to specific demands evolved into a new political language after independence. Alternatively, it could also be said that we see retrenchment of past practices in coping with so much violence. In either scenario, the outcome toward political instability was the same. Every time a rebellion broke out and coup leaders installed themselves in power, the substantial transcendence of politics—debate and compromise—became further devalued. The celebrations at the time, a *Te Deum* mass, pealing of bells, serving of refreshments, and all-around merry-making further solidified the use of pronunciamiento in the political culture of independent Mexico.

And here is where we see a watershed of transition in the political landscape of early nineteenth-century Mexico. What once was occasional gave way to the perfunctory. Under Spain's rule, acts of such political magnitude, particularly scale-wide rebellions, were relatively rare. Furthermore, the state had no formal policy to deal with such threats. But after independence in 1821, political uprisings became routine and so did

the measures to silence opposition to newly installed governments, including persecution of former opponents and restricting freedom of the press.

Fowler points out that in Spain pronunciados were often shot (259). The measure certainly did not deter future attempts. What I take from Fowler's insight pertains to comparative history and historiographical matters. True, in Hispanic American societies the pronunciamiento was to remain a prominent means of stalling or pushing change. Yet this is a statement in need of further research. What will further studies of pronunciamientos accomplish in regard to the study of history as the stage for "great men" to strut their stuff? Contributions to the field such as *Celebrating Insurrection* increasingly portray a picture of early republican Latin America in which *hombres de bien* (gentlemen) were unable to formulate political agendas for all to partake. Nonetheless, these historical actors were not mere puppets of the "big men" of history such as *bête noire* Antonio López de Santa Anna. The political waters of the time were indeed murky.

Starting with chapter six, the remainder of the book brings together textual analyses and the historiographical traditions that have arisen from within and outside Mexico. Engagement of this material is done either separately—as in chapter seven which focuses on early nineteenth-century works by Mexicans—or by blending both discussions—as in the last chapter, which discusses the views of foreign travelers about pronunciamientos. The generous use of published works, private correspondence, and newspaper articles lends these essays an engrossing journalistic quality. I commend everyone involved in the project, from contributors to publisher, for first, making use of material originally in Spanish. Secondly, offering translated versions of this material brings it to a broader audience. This is actually a trend in the historiography of early to mid-nineteenth-century Mexico. For an American audience, the mining not just of archival sources but also of published works and material by or about figures moves us away from the "great men" interpretation of history.

I found these chapters particularly useful in helping the reader better understand the context in which Octavio Paz made his assessment

that Mexicans are wont to behave in a certain way. A well-known figure in Mexican culture and letters, Paz wrote, “The lonely Mexican loves his fiestas and public gatherings” (xix). Over two hundred years ago, radical politicians such as Lorenzo de Zavala and José María Mora provided interpretations of such proclivities by highlighting oppressive political structures or the ambitions of uniformed men (155-9). José Bernardo de Couto, another politician, decried the practice of pronunciarse in order to defend “the theory of the general will” as tantamount to constant anarchy (xvii). Political rebellions and the festivities that may ensue, either to celebrate or forget their significance, teach us a great deal about the arduous process of cobbling together a sense of cultural homogeneousness.

Of course, historians do not like ambivalence in looking for motivations. What this has meant for twentieth-century historical production has turned the discipline toward a participant-actor who promotes a specific perspective of the pronunciamiento. Historical and cultural continuities make such an approach intellectually risky. At issue, however, is not to fault the historiography for having relied too much on late nineteenth century and twentieth century interpretations of that early period. Instead, to continue segmenting Mexican history into “transitional” and “mature” periods has led to political fabrications in Mexican nation-building. Antonia Pi-Suñer Llorens (chapter 8) does a masterful exploration of the origins and legacy of this nineteenth century historiographical practice.

The early or transitional is coded to stand for barbarism while the latter, more orderly period is now thought of as civilized. The first one means the nation had been placed at risk while the second supposedly provides the nation with its true stewards (184). Through such interpretive framework the historiography continues to propagate the assumption that there has always been a Mexico. Other interpretations are filtered out and the field searches for “bad Mexicans” whose shortsightedness impeded the redemption of a people. To put it in the words of Kerry McDonald, the bodies of dead men, “bad Mexicans” in particular, “are especially useful and effective in revising the past” (75).

In chapter eight, Antonia Pi-Suñer Llorens deals with the figure of Ignacio Comonfort. Comonfort's biography is representative of late nineteenth-century Mexico's need to find a clear, divine-ordained path toward national integration. Intellectuals and historians searched for great men to idolize or to question the motives of those who should have known better but somehow did not. Politician-soldier Comonfort had been among the Ayutla pronunciados who were able to overthrow the last Santa Anna administration and install a new government by 1855. A political moderate, Comonfort's political star began to dim as Congress turned more radical. What he did as the Ayutla leadership became more politically intransigent remains a matter of debate. The crux of the matter lies in questioning how much of a reformist Comonfort really was? Was he a politician who fell under the sway of more conservative forces or a centrist who nevertheless acted in as decisive a manner despite the circumstances? These were the types of questions nineteenth century Mexican historical production wrestled with in assessing why specific Mexicans should or should not be considered role models.

In a similar vein, Verónica Zárate Toscano (chapter 9) discusses the intellectual and political efforts by the Porfirian regime to project a heroic image of itself in order to build a sense of unity. The celebration to be promoted was not a pronunciamiento itself but a specific date in recent history. April 2, 1867, was the date when Porfirio Díaz attacked the city of Puebla and the city surrendered. Zárate Toscano explains she chose this celebration less for its overt political themes than for what it shows about Mexican society after the civil wars and foreign invasions of the mid-nineteenth-century. 1867 was the year when Maximilian's Mexican empire collapsed and Mexican victories over imperial forces paved the way for such an outcome. As ruler of Mexico in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, Díaz searched for a date to celebrate Mexican sovereignty without raising the specter of the type of political insubordination prevalent in the past. Choosing April 2, 1867 allowed the regime to aid "the formation of an emergent national imaginary" (203) while expanding the civic calendar with celebrations politically palatable to the regime.

It may be apparent, and even expected, that powerful national leaders of the Porfirian mold exert tremendous influence on their contemporaries, negative or positive. Yet, *Celebrating Insurrection* contributors remind us the neat divide between revisionist history and official history is far more movable than is apparent. Mexicans at all levels of society and government have been engaged in rewriting their history. Flore de María Salazar Mendoza (chapter 10) takes up the case of San Luis Potosí governor Juan Bustamante, elected to office in 1867. A year later this man was ousted by the local congress; this set in motion a countermove in which the ex-governor issued a pronunciamiento against the congress to regain his position. The state congress and its supporters admitted no wrong doing and defended their previous actions by claiming it was upholding the popular will. Revisionism now became the preferred tactic of the victorious faction. Former governor Juan Bustamante, who in the not so distant past had been lauded by the local population was recast as a man worthy of derision and his political credentials dismissed. I found the fact that the congress and its supporters used the name and figure of Miguel Hidalgo to inveigh against Bustamante provided further evidence of historical revisionism converted over time to truth. It is a moot point if Bustamante was indeed an “antidemocrat.” His opponents idealized the figure of Hidalgo and turned Bustamante into the “antithesis” (230) of the earlier historical figure. What had Hidalgo stood for exactly? Evidently, he came to embody the democratic principles upon which Bustamante trampled. The use of such circular arguments in idolizing or demonizing elected officials portrays the deep divisions running through nineteenth century Mexican society. Such polarizing tendencies further contributed to very widening chasms in which people of some means or authority purportedly wished to see closed.

Unsurprisingly, the arrival of a new governor in San Luis Potosí did not calm tensions. In fact, as Salazar Mendoza writes, Potosino society during the independence celebrations of September 1869 did not unanimously support Carlos Tovar. However, those who did support this man and the state congress took the stage to defend their collective position in what amount to counter-pronunciamientos. A newspaper editorial



referred to those who did not agree with the new political order as "bad Mexicans" (241). The acceptance of violence in politics now went unquestioned as was the expectation of political uniformity throughout the body politic after a new government had been installed.