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Review/Reseña

Aaron Bobrow-Strain, *Intimate Enemies: Landowners, Power, and Violence in Chiapas*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2007.

Rewriting the History of Social Conflict in Chiapas

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Aaron Bobrow-Strain's *Intimate Enemies: Landowners, Power, and Violence in Chiapas* is to the New Cultural History of Mexico, what Tulio Halperín Donghi's *Historia Contemporanea de América Latina* was to the Dependency *genre*: a book which develops and simultaneously transcends the limits of its paradigm.

In 1999, in a special issue of the *Hispanic American Historical Review* (Vol. 79, No. 2) evaluating the contribution of New Cultural History to the historiography of Modern Mexico, Eric Van Young proposed that, in the struggle faced by Latin American history to reinvent itself after the dismantling of dependency theory as a meta-narrative, "cultural and economic history...may usefully be united to the benefit of each other." This had "partially to do with the principle of overdetermination: that a single effect, such as the action of an individual...may have several causes...and partially with the idea that all

human actions and expressions have cultural values or meanings” (Van Young 1999: 213). He thus advocated as fruitful “a synthesis of historical-structural and culturalist explanations,” which “look at...economic relations as the sites of the generation of cultural meaning” (238). Such “colonization” of economic history could, he considered, be particularly successfully applied to the analysis of conflicts (i.e. agrarian), which have both an economic and a cultural or “ideational” nature. In the same issue, Mary Kay Vaughn, also an advocate of New Cultural History, emphasized the way in which local history, closely associated both conceptually and methodologically with New Cultural History, focuses its study on “the interplay between state forms and practices, market forces and social subjects” and underlines the relationship between cultural and material processes (302).

In this regard, *Intimate Enemies*, which analyses agrarian struggles between landowners and peasants in two municipalities in north-central Chiapas from the late nineteenth century to the land invasions of 1994-98 as “a process of cultural-political struggle over space operating in multiple registers including race and gender” (40), and which conceptualizes landed production “as...a set of relational practices operating on multiple material and discursive levels that orders space in particular ways” (7), may seem to fall squarely into the mould of New Cultural History as defined both by its advocates and critics (see, for an example of the latter, the essay by Stephen Haber in the same issue of HAHR).

However, if we analyze the book using the typology laid out by Alan Knight in his 2002 critique of New Cultural History (*Latin American Research Review*, Vol. 37, No. 2), *Intimate Enemies* appears to transcend the limits of its genre, as previously defined. Knight identifies seven features that characterize New Cultural History: Subalterns; (Subaltern) Agency; Political Engagement; History with the Politics Put Back In; Mentalities; Textual Criticism; and Interdisciplinary Influences.

With regard to the first “sin”—an over-weaning concern for “subalterns,” frequently with little analysis of “alterns”—the book is definitely not “guilty”: the main subject of study is Chiapas’s *ladino* (non-Indian) landowners whose negative stereotype the book

consciously aims to deconstruct, in order to “take seriously—in an ethnographic and theoretical way—the[ir] lived experience” (18).

With regard to the second point, the author is at pains to highlight the limits of landowner agency through time and space, what he terms the “incongruities and contradictions of landowners’ hegemony” (8). This could, of course, be construed as letting subaltern agency in “by the back door” for if landowners’ power is less than was previously portrayed in the literature, subaltern agency, i.e. that of indigenous peasants, must be greater than was assumed. However, while the book deepens our understanding of the perceptions and motives of landowners, it also analyses the means (both brutal and subtle) through which landowner domination was maintained prior to 1994. It thus attempts to provide a more nuanced, complex, and perhaps “realistic” portrayal of ethnic and agrarian politics in Chiapas by going beyond “the dualism of ‘good’ indigenous peasants and ‘bad’ ladino landlords” (18).

The third feature of New Cultural History (leftist political engagement) is present but ultimately absent: present because the author identifies himself as a leftist intellectual and activist whose “natural allies under different circumstances” may have been indigenous activists and liberation theology priests (17); but absent, or perhaps suspended, because of his clear affection for and genuine interest in the histories of the landowners and their families who constitute the subjects of his research. The result is a rich and frequently ambivalent historical and ethnographical analysis of elite hegemony, in which carefully pieced together personal and family histories contribute subjective evidence for structural tendencies.

The fourth feature, “history with the politics put back in,” i.e. the state and state-civil society relations, form a key element of the book. Following the paradigm of “everyday forms of state formation” developed in the 1990s by post-revisionist historians of the Mexican Revolution, Bobrow-Strain convincingly emphasizes the significance of the changing relationship between ladino landowners, indigenous peasants, and the state in shaping the contours of agrarian struggle from the nineteenth century, when the state began “working [its] way slowly into the Chiapanecan countryside and steadily transforming the

terrain of social relations” (50), to the massive redistribution of land which followed in the wake of the Zapatista uprising of 1994.

In the first period, ladino landowners became the sole or central nexus between indigenous peasants and the state, a privileged position, which enabled them to shape the Liberal state and its “territorial project” to their own interests, but at the same time subordinated them to the workings of state rule. In the second, post-revolutionary period of 1920-62, Bobrow-Strain argues that state-sponsored agrarian reform was “extensive and transformative...undermin[ing] landowners position as the sole nexus between peasants and the state” (88). At the same time, unable to turn their back on the state, in a maneuver reminiscent of di Lampedusa’s *Leopard*, landowners “changed to stay the same,” “appropriat[ing] many elements of post-revolutionary rule to buttress their defense against peasants’ claims” (14). To maintain their hegemony, “landowners quickly and effectively reworked the logics and practices of post-revolutionary rule to further their privileged control over land and labor.” Yet, “by appropriating the Revolution in this way, landowners also subjected themselves to the legitimating discourses of agrarian reform and social justice, and increasingly found themselves forced to shore up their crumbling authority with substantial concessions to a peasantry also empowered by state practices.” (81).

In the third period, the 1970s and 1980s, three key factors shaped agrarian conflict: the shift to (state-subsidized) livestock production; the appearance of new actors—proponents of liberation theology and leftist opposition parties—that fomented the radical territorial claims of many indigenous groups and undermined landowners’ authority; and growing conflicts between rival peasant groups. Anxious to retain control in the countryside, the PRI “beg[a]n to see cultivating, controlling, and mollifying *indigenous* mediators rather than traditional ladino authorities as the only way to resolve agrarian conflict—even if at times it meant backing away from the party’s historical support for ladino landowners” (129). Thus, a new situation emerged in which a growing body of competing peasant organizations gradually displaced landowners as the mediators between the state and the countryside, drawing the state’s attention away from landowners’ traditional concerns and leading to declining support for their interests.

In the fourth period, 1994-98, the state responded to the “uncontrollable series of land seizures” that followed the armed uprising of 1994 with the Agrarian Accords of 1996. These paved the way for state-subsidized purchases and the redistribution of land on an unprecedented scale: by 2000, 244,000 hectares or 13% of private agricultural property had been handed over and the swift resolution of outstanding land reform claims on private and public land had added another 242,000 hectares to the social sector. Thus, paradoxically, just two years after reform of the Mexican Constitution had supposedly brought “the definitive end to land reform,” “land tenure in Chiapas underwent a rapid re-peasantization and re-indigenization rather than privatization and concentration” accompanied, in many cases, by “accelerated ladino out-migration” (4), a situation tacitly accepted by the state.

Returning to Knight’s typology, the fifth feature of New Cultural History, the concern with mentalities, imaginings and discourses, also constitutes a key aspect of the book, which turns around a central question: Why would coffee planters and cattle ranchers with a long and storied history of violent responses to agrarian conflict react to the invasions of 1994-1998 with quiescence and resignation instead of thugs and guns?

Although the author consciously locates his analysis within Marxian-inspired agrarian political economy, he defines the political economy of estate agriculture as a process of cultural-political struggle over territory, and interprets agrarian conflict in Chiapas as battles in which ladinos have attempted to “defend the spatial order of landed production in the face of indigenous claims to land and autonomy” (42). Central to this defense of landowner hegemony has been the complex and undetermined power relations through which subjects, ideologies, and practices articulate in particular moments and places.

Between 1880 and 1910, the number of commercial estates soared and more than half the state’s indigenous population was dispossessed of customary land rights and put to work as debt-bound workers on newly established private estates. During this period “estates made subjects” in “social-spatial terms,” dependent on and subordinate to the landowner, financially, physically, mentally and emotionally. Alongside “carefully cultivated alcoholism,” the workings

of estate labor relied on “enforced isolation... debt servitude and...elaborate rituals of paternalism and respect” (13), all of which created peon and patron as subjects, bolstering the authority of the latter and constructing him or her as the sole mediator between the estate and the wider world. In the period 1920-62, the institutions of revolutionary rule gave rise not only to agrarian reform and new channels through which peasants could interact with the state, but also to “new indigenous identities and territorial claims” (88). Thirty years later, the mobilizations of 1994-98 “reflected a powerful resurgence of indigenous territorial projects that reshaped the spaces and social relations of landed production” (135).

At the same time, landowner identity became centered on racialized understandings of production and accumulation, and its attendant “territorial project.” This ideology first emerged during the period of nineteenth century Liberal rule, and was nurtured in the post-revolutionary era by the PRI’s national food and industrialization policies. It justified landowners’ occupation of land claimed by peasants, defined them collectively as *ladinos*, and decided their historical place in the nation vis-à-vis their indigenous neighbors. However, the neo-liberal economic restructuring in the 1980s and 1990s contributed to the dethronement of landowners from their privileged position in the imaginary of national development at the same time that they were displaced as the principal interlocutors between indigenous peasants and the state, leaving them “flailing for new ways to position themselves in the nation and deeply convinced that the conflict [of 1994-1998] was not manageable and their resistance was doomed to failure” (15). The author also links landowner quiescence to their fear of indigenous “savagery,” which had previously shaped *ladino* identity and the spaces of landed production in Chilón, and which later influenced landowners’ calculations of the costs and benefits of resisting agrarian conflict following 1994. He concludes that shifting landowner hegemony and the combination of “fear, economic crisis, and generational change” together “made violent responses to land invasions seem impossible and pointless” (186).

Thus, culture and ideology constitute central elements in the way in which the book analyzes commodity production and agrarian struggle. Yet, rather than being treated independently, mentalities,

beliefs and identities are conceived and analyzed as being embedded within material processes, to such an extent that the book represents, perhaps, not so much the colonization of economic history by cultural history, but the reverse. Such colonization, or synthesis, derives from the author's conscious attempt to negotiate post-structural insights regarding the "socially constructed nature of knowledge and its entanglements with power," while advancing an empirically based structural analysis of social change as the best way to "provide convincing answers to particular questions" (11-12) and from his insistence on rooting his analysis in agrarian political economy.

Such a synthesis is also reflected in the book's "holistic" methodology, which integrates the analysis of national economic and political trends, regional political tendencies and socio-economic structures, local actors and events, and collective identities and individual subjectivities; and which employs, but does not conflate, historical and ethnographical sources.

Thus, in contrast to many anthropological and political works on modern Mexico, the author not only undertook primary research on the principal period of study, but he also carried out historical research in national, regional and municipal archives on the period from the 1880s to the 1980s. This archival research, together with an impressive number of interviews with current and former landowners, spanning four generations, complemented by a selection of interviews with the leaders of land invasions, members of the Catholic Church, human rights activists, government officials, and other people closely associated with peasant movements, provide an authoritative basis for the author's interpretations.

Consequently, unlike many other works of New Cultural History, the analysis is empirically grounded, and textual criticism (Knight's sixth feature of the *genre*) forms a minor element, which enriches, but does not constitute the foundation of the argument

What is of importance are "interdisciplinary influences"—the seventh and final of Knight's features. In the book, Bobrow-Strain combines methodological insights and theoretical approaches from the disciplines of history, anthropology, ethnography and geography to create a history of landed production and an analysis of agrarian struggle, which turns around the axes of identity and territoriality, but

which melds “poststructural understandings of power and critical human geography” with Marxian-inspired agrarian political economy to underline the role played by material processes in the constitution of identities and discourses.

Thus, while *Intimate Enemies* can be characterized as a local history of agrarian conflict which synthesizes “historical-structural and culturalist explanations,” it scores positively in only three of Knights seven features of New Cultural History: History with the Politics Put Back In; Mentalities; and Interdisciplinary Influences. Furthermore, with its emphasis on political economy, the book represents a welcome *decolonization* of economic history by cultural history, or the “economization” of cultural history, grounding discourse analysis in gritty political realities, and reminding the reader of the mundane, but significant influence of agricultural policies and commodity prices on conditioning individual and collective identities and actions.

Intimate Enemies is an important book for historians, anthropologists and students of peasants from all disciplines. Aaron Bobrow-Strain, by focusing on the concepts of position and territoriality, has managed to reconcile, at least in his analysis of landed elites and agrarian conflict in Chiapas, post-structuralism with the empiricism of political economy, and discursive analysis with historical materialism. The book can be read in a number of ways: as part of a growing literature that attempts to understand political conflict in Chiapas before and after 1994; as a modern history of Chiapas; as part of a growing post-revisionist historiography of the Mexican Revolution that emphasizes state formation, social transformation and political struggle; as a history of modernization in Mexico and the rest of Latin America in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; as a history of agrarian conflict, agrarian reform and agrarian change more widely; as a cultural history of production; and as an ethnographic study of landed elites, which “de-essentializes” negative stereotypes in order to better our understanding of the “unexpected trajectories of agrarian change” (19).