

Recent Works on the Mexican Revolution

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JEFFREY L. BORTZ AND STEPHEN HABER (eds.): *The Mexican Economy, 1870-1930: Essays on the Economic History of Institutions, Revolution, and Growth*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002.

PAUL GARNER: *Porfirio Díaz: Profiles in Power*. New York: Longman, 2001.

MICHAEL J. GONZALES: *The Mexican Revolution, 1910-1940*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2002.

PETER V. N. HENDERSON: *In the Absence of Don Porfirio: Francisco León de la Barra and the Mexican Revolution*. Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 2000.

FRIEDRICH KATZ: *The Life and Times of Pancho Villa*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998.

NOEL MAURER: *The Power and the Money: The Mexican Financial System, 1876-1932*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002.

FRANK MCLYNN: *Villa and Zapata: A History of the Mexican Revolution*. New York: Carroll & Graf, 2001.

There have been two important trends in the 20th century historiography of Latin America that have been applied to the Mexican Revolution. The first, dealing with cultural and social history, is subaltern studies. This trend has revolutionized the field of Latin American history by using the new social history first popularized during the 1960s as a method of telling history from the bottom up. In particular, subaltern studies looks at the power arrangements and relationships on both a macro and micro level, the relationship between *peones* and *cacique*, for instance, or between the urban elite and rural *hacendados*. The trend has

also generated a new methodology for viewing the relationship between Latin American countries and the western juggernauts, as Mexico can be viewed as having subaltern status to the hegemonic United States or Great Britain.

The second important trend has been in the continuing economic debate over *dependismo* – dependency theory, the result of a 1960s intellectual convergence of the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the school of Neo-Marxism. This theory holds that the world is divided between a developed “center” (for instance, Western Europe and the United States) and an under-developed “periphery” (for instance, Latin America). Because of the inherent disparities between the center and the periphery, the latter required the former for progress and yet greater benefit was accrued by the center when the two engaged in trade. Explanations of underdevelopment were therefore linked not to a cultural inability to develop economically (such as the so-called Mediterranean ethos), but to an extractive system dating back to the colonial period, with new nations having replaced Spain and Portugal as the “center.” Since the advent of dependency theory, proponents of Neo-Liberal economics in the region have sought to replace it with an alternative rooted less in class struggle and more in regional peculiarity. Examples of this are corporatism—which views Latin Americans, because of the ubiquity of the Catholic Church, as “cooperative” rather than “acquisitive”—or bureaucratic authoritarianism—which sees the military dictatorships of the mid-century as both a response to the earlier progressive movements and an artificial control over production which would otherwise be more *laissez-faire*. The section of this article dealing with the two economic histories under review will show one way historians are trying to replace dependency as the dominant theoretical paradigm.

A Synthesis

While Alan Knight’s work remains the pre-eminent modern detailed work on the period, both Henderson and Tutino¹ are in agreement that Michael J. Gonzales’ *The Mexican Revolution, 1910-1940* is a good brief general text that will serve undergraduate students of the subject very well. Sweeping in scope, Gonzales, a specialist in Peruvian history, deals with the bulk of the *Porfiriato*, the revolutionary decade, and politico-military developments from the Obregón administration through the *Maximato* to Cárdenas.

What is left out, however, is just as important as what is included. The discussion of the revolutionary decade and after tends to circulate around the heroes and villains of the traditional accounts: the Díazes, Madero, Huerta, Zapata, Villa, Carranza, Obregón, Calles, and Cárdenas—and the impact of United States

foreign policy, an indispensable aspect to any discussion of the Revolution. A more textured understanding of the regional variegations—which was one of Knight’s important contributions — would have been appreciated, as well as a discussion including more nuances regarding the important ethnic and cultural divisions between and within the regions. While there is some socio-economic history in Gonzales’ treatment of the *Porfiriato* and the Revolution up to 1917, his approach to the period after the Constitution is largely limited to the political and cultural spheres, discussing the Cristero Wars and the resemblance of the *Maximato* to the Díaz era. The book lives up to its title, of course, in including the post-1920 era, if only the politico-cultural aspects. Nonetheless, this reviewer hopes that the next important work to include the Cárdenas administration will place him in the context of the global economic downturn rather than in a discussion of the political overthrow of the *Maximato*.

Two on economics

In *The Mexican Economy, 1870-1930*, Jeffrey L. Bortz and Stephen Haber have edited eight² essays that utilize the New Institutional Economics (NIE), the paradigm they expect to replace the dependency theory of the previous generation of economic historians of Latin America. “Briefly stated, scholars came to the realization that propositions that emanate from dependency theory could be neither proven nor disproved because the theory offered no concept of relative autonomy or dependence” (p. 2). The NIE theorizes that economic trends depend on (and in turn affect) the institutions with which they co-exist, especially government regulatory institutions. The theory is critical in understanding economics over the past century and a half, especially as modern economies have moved from the proprietary-competitive stage to the corporate-administered stage.³ The NIE emphasizes property rights, the rents afforded by such rights, their institutionalization, and the use of institutions by property-owners to further their interests. In recent years, economists have turned to Latin America as a testing ground for NIE (because the region’s many revolutions have increased the historical variety of its regulatory states), while Latin American historians have begun to turn to NIE as a replacement for dependency theory and culture-based theories.

The essays are divided into three economic categories, all dealing with institutional reforms: the financial system (“the network of banks and securities markets that facilitate the valuation and exchange of assets in the real economy” [p. 10]), foreign trade (the regulation of tariffs), and labor relations. Three essays (by Haber and Noel Maurer; Carlos Marichal; and Paolo Riguzzi) discuss

how the financial system was set up in such a way that the big banks, especially Banamex (*Banco Nacional de México*), gained favorable regulation by lending to the Porfirian government. This regulation limited the entrance of new financial institutions into the economy, which in turn stunted industrial growth. In the field of foreign trade, two essays (by Sandra Kuntz Ficker and Edward Beatty) discuss how tariffs on certain targeted goods (manufactured products) were lowered after 1875, while overall tariffs grew as a percentage of the cost of imports. Thus the Porfirian economy was simultaneously protectionist and modern.

The title of the book is technically correct in that two of the eight essays deal with post-Porfirian economics. The section title for these two essays, however, mistakenly identifies them as “Labor Relations Reforms during the Porfiriato” (pp. vi. and 253). The first of these essays, by Bortz, deals with industrial property rights during the Revolution, while the second, by Aurora Gómez-Galvarriato, discusses labor relations in the textile industry between 1900 and 1930.

The Power and the Money: The Mexican Financial System, 1876-1932, by Noel Maurer, builds upon the New Institutional Economics. Specifically, Maurer discusses the impact of banking systems on macroeconomics and politics in Porfirian and Revolutionary Mexico. The *Porfiriato* was a period of unprecedented financial stability for the nation, largely due to the creation and nurturing of the Banamex monopoly over taxation and the state banks. In addition, there was the system of insider lending, or making loans to bank officers and other “known quantities,” which counteracted the lack of information banks had about the viability of outside investment opportunities. This created a centralized and concentrated economic hierarchy closely linked to the centralized and concentrated political hierarchy. These factors, coupled with the political stability of the *Porfiriato*, fostered the economic stability of the period.

This ended with the fall of Díaz and the subsequent political turmoil. “The Mexican Revolution turned Mexico’s economic life upside down. This was not done through the destruction of physical capital and equipment. In fact, Mexico’s manufacturing plant, irrigation systems, mining installations and railway network came through the fighting relatively intact. Rather, it came about through the widespread violation of property rights” (p. 158). Given his adherence to NIE, Maurer’s vision of the violation of property rights as the true economic revolution should come as no surprise.

The Carranza and Obregón administrations, faced with the devaluation of the peso, instability of the federal and state banking system, and lack of national credit, returned to the centralized and concentrated banking hierarchy with strong ties to the government. This helped bring about a return to a highly centralized and concentrated political structure, which came to fruition during the *Maximato*. Whereas the political stability of the *Porfiriato* had fostered its

economic stability, the economic stability of the Obregón administration fostered the political stability of the *Maximato*. “Porfirian arrangements did not survive the Revolution; they were independently recreated afterward” (p. 198).

Just in time for the recent successful challenge to the PRI, Paul Garner’s addition to the *Profiles in Power* series almost rehabilitates Porfirio Díaz—and calls upon historians of the era to finish the job. Tracing Díaz from his provincial Oaxaca roots and his progressive political origins through his presidential terms and ultimate downfall, Garner makes the important point that Díaz was not always the aging dictator of 1910. Rather, he was a successful politician who came to serve the interests of the “haves” over the “have-nots” and became the great protector of the social and political *status quo*. It is only in light of the subsequent Revolution, Garner argues, that Díaz begins to look like the embodiment of evil, but he was not always thus; the backroom deals with American and British businessmen were more the result of pragmatic economic leadership than the pursuit of autocratic power.

Still, one cannot help but find some difficulty with this interpretation. Even allowing Garner the point of Díaz’ pragmatism, the President was at the very least guilty of fostering the governmental corruption that was so deeply entrenched by 1910. And Knight⁴ is correct in pointing out that on the economic score, at least, Garner is downright wrong. The Porfirian economy was not “like her sister republics in Latin America...locked into a cycle of monocultural (i.e. single product) production” (p. 166); Mexico produced a variety of commodities (albeit mostly raw) for export. On balance, however, the basic rehabilitation of Díaz is indeed a useful exercise. Díaz ultimately was neither the bogeyman of the revolutionary era nor the unselfish reformer of the 1860s; to some extent, he was both; but in the big picture he still needs a fuller treatment than our profession has yet afforded him.

One would assume, based on Peter V.N. Henderson’s earlier work on Félix Díaz,⁵ that his latest work—on Interim President Francisco León de la Barra—continues a trend of apologism for the *ancien regime*, perhaps just the sort of new perspective Garner is seeking for a cast of characters that has traditionally been vilified. This is not the case. In fact, rather than resurrect the legacy of a Porfirian politician, Henderson’s work serves to enrich our understanding of the early revolutionary period. De la Barra, who served for about six months from the exile of Díaz until the assumption of the presidency by Madero, was a stopgap between the two regimes, and Henderson uses him as a liaison between our understanding of the *Porfiriato* and the subsequent political overhaul. A bourgeois Porfirian, de la Barra was progressive enough to succeed Díaz but too much in love with social order to politically survive the fall of Huerta.

Where Henderson's work does serve to rehabilitate de la Barra is when it shows how it was during his regime—not Madero's—that progressivism returned to the forefront of Mexican politics after a thirty-year absence. "Calling for political enfranchisement, order, economic development, and modest social change...the progressive consensus resembled in many ways the revolutionary reformism that eventually triumphed" (p. 235).

The process once started, however, de la Barra's elitist and bourgeois temperament could not brook the emerging revolutionary leadership of rough men like Villa. After his unfortunate participation in the Huerta cabinet (and here Henderson blithely absolves de la Barra of any guilt for the murder of Madero), he never returned from his comfortable French exile.

What is missing is brief: as Buffinton⁶ has pointed out, Henderson missed the opportunity to use de la Barra to get into a larger discussion of Porfirian society, instead limiting himself to the political realm. And while he shows how de la Barra, without any impact on Mexico, remained an active intellectual in Europe well into the 1930s, a discussion could have been included about how de la Barra bridged the gap between Mexican nationalism and the postwar Wilsonian discussion of European national self-determination.

Seventeen years after his initial investigation of foreign strategic interference in the Mexican Revolution before and during World War One,⁷ Friedrich Katz has returned with what is one of the most comprehensive volumes on Pancho Villa ever published. The purpose of such a large amount of paper (985 pages) is to return Villa to his traditional revolutionary role, which has been downplayed by Womack⁸ and others. Whereas Womack's Villa is almost a social conservative, seeking to preserve a regional *status quo*, Katz's Villa is a true revolutionary with a program of land and economic reform. Katz does not dispute that at certain times Villa—perhaps unwittingly, perhaps due to short-term thinking—made traditionalist statements and tended to reward his soldiers first and require military service from those who expected to benefit from the Revolution. Villa was not an educated man and did not consciously adhere to a set theory, progressive or otherwise. Yet his long-term activities, Katz claims, and the fact that "large-scale redistribution of goods to the poorest segments of the people took place" (p.817), are sufficient to allay any doubts regarding Villa's status as a "true" revolutionary.

In *Villa and Zapata: A History of the Mexican Revolution*, Frank McLynn presents the Revolution as one which accords a greater degree of importance to Villa and Zapata than to Madero, Huerta, Carranza, or Obregón. It is also a revolution akin to the first phases of the French, Russian and Chinese Revolutions in that it represents the triumph of liberal capitalism. "Obregón mobilized the masses to promote a modern state and a modern economy, destroying, co-opting,

or placating all dissident elements in such a way that no door to communism opened up on the Left; and because he had to carry the masses with him, he could not swing hard Right into fascism” (pg. 402).

McLynn divides the revolutionaries into three categories: the liberal capitalists, i.e. Madero, Carranza, and Obregón—who face off against the *ancien regime* of the *hacendados* (represented by the Díazes and Huerta); the social revolutionaries under Zapata; and the military brigands under Villa. For McLynn, the politico-economic revolution of Madero, Carranza and Obregón is secondary to the social revolution of Zapata and the militarism and *machismo* of Villa. To that extent, at least, the popular histories of the Mexican Revolution got it right, for it is to Villa and Zapata that the people looked for their revolutionary heroes, and it is in them that McLynn finds his Washington and Jefferson. This reduction of Villa to his military role in the revolution skirts the issue debated by Womack and Katz—that of Villa’s revolutionary character. Zapata is the controlled, educated, *hacendado* revolutionary, while Villa—often referred to as “the centaur,” part man, part horse—is the brash, militaristic revolutionary. For McLynn, however, the real centaur is in the combination of the two, representing two facets of the people in their ultimately unsuccessful bid for a more fundamental revolution.

Conclusion

In 1999, the historian Eric van Young said of recent histories of the Mexican Revolution that “it is probably difficult to shrug off the impression that we are finding out more and more about less and less.”⁹ Indeed, one of the results of the emphasis placed on cultural history in the final decades of the 20th century was the proliferation of micro-historical works. Perhaps the absence of micro-histories in this review is an indication that the field has turned a corner. Even those with titles that would indicate a possible micro-historical bent, such as those of Garner and Henderson, in fact tell much larger stories than simply the lives of Díaz and de la Barra; their primary subjects are used as vehicles for relating much larger histories.

What appears to have returned to the field are sweep and drama. With his synthesis, Gonzales has extended the Revolutionary period to a three-decade span, while Katz and McLynn tell the stories of larger-than-life heroes not unrecognizable in their on-screen counterparts. And despite the sheer size of Katz’s volume, these three in particular appear to be intended for a wider audience beyond the academy. While some of us may sneer at that, this is not ultimately an impractical exercise.

In the field of economic history, the New Institutional Economics represents a major departure from the historiography of the 20th century. But while both the Bortz/Haber and the Maurer works rely heavily on the NIE, it should be pointed out that the demise of dependency theory is by no means certain. NIE will probably serve as a rallying theory for proponents of Neo-Liberalism, but dependency theory will remain viable at least as long as there are scholars on the Left.

NOTES

1. Henderson, Peter V.N., "The Mexican Revolution, 1910-1940" (*Hispanic American Historical Review*, Vol. 83, No. 1 [February, 2003]), pp. 185-187, and Tutino, John, "The Mexican Revolution, 1910-1940" (*The Americas*, Vol. 59, No. 4 [April, 2003]), pp. 581-583.
2. This number does not include the introductory and concluding essays.
3. Sklar, Martin J. *The Corporate Reconstruction of American Capitalism, 1890-1916* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988). It should be stressed that this transition occurred in the second half of the 19th century in the juggernaut economies of the United States and Western Europe; in Latin America, this transition tended to occur during the 20th century—in those economies where it occurred at all. Mexico's economy seems to have undergone this transition during the *Porfiriato*.
4. Knight, Alan, "Porfirio Díaz" (*English Historical Review*, Vol. 117. No. 473 [September, 2002], pp. 928-930).
5. Henderson, Peter V.N., *Felix Díaz, The Porfirians, and the Mexican Revolution* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1981).
6. Robert Buffinton, "In the Absence of Don Porfirio: Francisco Leon de la Barra and the Mexican Revolution" (*The Historian*, Vol. 64, Iss. 1 [Summer, 2001], pp. 142-3).
7. Katz, Friedrich, *The Secret War in Mexico: Europe, the United States and the Mexican Revolution*. (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1981).
8. Womack, John Jr., *Zapata and the Mexican Revolution*. (NY: Knopf, 1969).
9. Van Young, Eric, "Making Leviathan Sneeze: Recent Works on Mexico and the Mexican Revolution" (*Latin American Research Review*, Vol. 34, No. 3 [1999] pp. 143-165).