

BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

The Everyday Experience of Revolution and “Counterrevolution” in Mexico, 1910–1940 (and Beyond)

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This essay reviews the following works:

Orozco: The Life and Death of a Mexican Revolutionary. By Raymond Caballero. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2017. Pp. vii + 343. \$24.95 paperback. ISBN: 9780806157559.

Unrevolutionary Mexico: The Birth of a Strange Dictatorship. By Paul Gillingham. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2021. Pp. xi + 464. \$42.30 hardcover. ISBN: 9780300253122.

Insurgency, Counter-Insurgency, and Policing in Centre-West Mexico, 1926–1929: Fighting Cristeros. By Mark Lawrence. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020. Pp. viii + 196. \$112.50 hardcover. ISBN: 9781350095458.

Soldiers, Saints, and Shamans: Indigenous Communities and the Revolutionary State in Mexico’s Gran Nayar, 1910–1940. By Nathaniel Morris. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2020. Pp. xx + 371. \$35.00 paperback. ISBN: 9780816541027.

Los Mensajeros de Job: Otra cara de la revolución en Yucatán. By Marisa Pérez de Sarmiento. Mexico City: UNAM, 2017. Pp. 292. \$77 hardcover. ISBN: 9786073032995.

Edición y comunismo: Cultura impresa, educación militante y prácticas políticas (México, 1930–1940). By Sebastián Rivera Mir. Raleigh, NC: Editorial A Contracorriente, 2020. \$30.00 paperback. Pp. ix + 286. ISBN: 9781945234781.

In Combat: The Life of Lombardo Toledano. By Daniela Spenser. Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2020. Pp. xiv + 422. \$28.00 paperback. ISBN: 9781642593341.

For Christ and Country: Militant Catholic Youth in Post-Revolutionary Mexico. By Robert Weis. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. Pp. xi + 200. \$80.00 hardcover. ISBN: 9781108493024.

In the wake of Mexico’s “lost decade” of the 1980s, historians of Mexico began to reconsider the Mexican Revolution’s defining role in the twentieth century, a historiographical shift

dutifully tracked in *Latin American Research Review*.¹ As the revolution lost its gravitational pull, historians began to move away from the study of organized protest and state-managed repression and toward the everyday reproduction of unequal power relations.² This transition from domination and resistance to hegemony was influenced by emerging trends in postcolonial theory (particularly subaltern studies) and the so-called cultural turn in European historiography.³ These new trends in social science increasingly saw social and economic reproduction in cultural terms, favoring the examination of the practices and rituals that ordered the quotidian life of the popular classes over more exceptional moments of overt resistance or massive rupture.

In practical terms, by the turn of the century the great syntheses of the Mexican Revolution had given way to regional studies of state formation.⁴ The consolidation of the postrevolutionary state in particular became an intellectual cottage industry in the first decade of the 2000s.⁵ Historians of Mexico (especially in the United States) sought to “decenter” the monolithic interpretation of the postrevolutionary state, representing it as an elaborate mosaic of pacts, negotiated separately and on a piecemeal basis, between collectively organized local and regional power groups and the state. In the past decade, this decentered lens has been used to forge a new horizon in the study of state formation: the consolidation of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI). The recent explosion of histories of *dictablanda*—the “soft authoritarianism” of the 1940s–1960s—has filled a notable lacuna in the historiography and illuminated some of the previously hidden contours of Mexico’s “strange dictatorship” while also drawing the historiography further from the revolution.⁶

The eight books under review show that the theoretical and methodological approaches that have drawn the field away from the revolution in the past three decades can still be used to make sense of the revolution and its aftermath; that examining more subtle,

¹ Eric Van Young, “Making Leviathan Sneeze: Recent Works on Mexico and the Mexican Revolution,” *Latin American Research Review* 34, no. 3 (1999): 143–165; Mark Wasserman, “You Can Teach an Old Revolutionary Historiography New Tricks: Regions, Popular Movements, Culture, and Gender in Mexico, 1820–1940,” *Latin American Research Review* 43, no. 2 (2008): 260–271; Jürgen Buchenau, “The Mexican Revolution at Its Centennial,” *Latin American Research Review* 48, no. 2 (2013): 184–192; Mary Kay Vaughan, “Mexico, 1940–1968 and beyond: Perfect Dictatorship? Dictablanda? Or PRI State Hegemony?” *Latin American Research Review* 53, no. 1 (2018): 167–176.

² Gilbert Joseph and Daniel Nugent, eds., *Everyday Forms of State Formation: Revolution and the Negotiation of Rule in Modern Mexico* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994).

³ The special issue “Mexico’s New Cultural History: ¿Una lucha libre?,” *Hispanic American Historical Review* 79, no. 2 (May 1999), took stock of the “new” cultural history of Mexico; in the same year, Victoria Bonnell and Lynn Hunt published an edited volume, *Beyond the Cultural Turn: New Directions in the Study of Society and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999). The “cultural turn” had a tremendous impact on my own work on the revolution. See Ristow, *A Revolution Unfinished: The Chegomista Rebellion and the Limits of Revolutionary Democracy* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2018).

⁴ The syntheses include Alan Knight, *The Mexican Revolution*, 2 vols. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986); John Mason Hart, *Revolutionary Mexico: The Coming and Process of the Mexican Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987); Ramón Eduardo Ruiz, *The Great Rebellion: Mexico 1905–1924* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1980); as well as Friedrich Katz’s edited volume *Riot, Rebellion, and Revolution: Rural Social Conflict in Mexico* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988).

⁵ A small sample includes Adrian Bantjes, *As If Jesus Walked the Earth: Cardenismo, Sonora, and the Mexican Revolution* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998); Ben Fallaw, *Cardenas Compromised: The Failure of Reform in Postrevolutionary Yucatán* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001); Chris Boyer, *Becoming Campesinos: Politics, Identity, and Agrarian Struggle in Postrevolutionary Michoacán* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003); Matthew Butler, *Popular Piety and Political Identity in Mexico’s Cristero Rebellion: Michoacán, 1927–29* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004).

⁶ Paul Gillingham and Benjamin T. Smith, eds., *Dictablanda: Politics, Work, and Culture, 1938–1968* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014); Gladys I. McCormick, *The Logic of Compromise in Mexico: How the Countryside Was Key to the Emergence of Authoritarianism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016); and Gillingham’s volume reviewed in this essay.

intangible (“everyday”) formations of power can help us understand more visible forms of contentious collective action and, ultimately, why some people—particularly the popular classes—choose to join overt protest movements while others do not. These books underscore the importance of cultural milieu, on the one hand unpacking the dense layers of mediation by which those “on the ground” make sense of larger geopolitical events and structural change, and on the other hand focusing on the everyday experience of revolutionary change and its reflection in material culture. The lived experience of social conflict and its subjective interpretation informed political behavior more than broad, abstract ideology, determining who participated in mass protest and how, in addition to underscoring the importance of contingent factors and motivations often related to the reproduction of daily life. The subjectivity of the revolution’s political logics begs for thick description in the place of easy generalization and demands a creative approach to archival research. From participant observation and oral history, to diaries and catalogs, to private correspondence and private papers, all these authors go beyond official histories and archives and set a high bar for students of the Mexican Revolution and popular mobilization in general. If the monolithic state has been decentered, replaced by a mosaic of local pacts, illuminating the contours of those pacts requires an understanding of the political-cultural milieu in which they are negotiated. The books under review all take milieu and the challenge of thick description seriously, and in so doing, they add to our understanding of Mexico’s revolutionary mosaic, from the *provincia* to the capital and from its opening salvo to its prolonged demise.

Rural rebellion and “counterrevolution”

For decades, the historiography of the revolution was divided into revolutionary and counterrevolutionary camps, and those labeled “counterrevolutionary” were relegated to history’s fabled dustbin. However, more nuanced examinations of popular participation in the revolution have blurred political lines, accentuating the play of complicated logics that draw ordinary people into larger political movements. Raymond Caballero, Nathaniel Morris, and Mark Lawrence seek to understand the motivations of ordinary rural people who join armed movements, revolutionary and otherwise. While the latter two focus on the Cristero War of the 1920s, the first deconstructs the life history of one of Mexico’s most famous and most elusive revolutionaries.

Pascual Orozco was arguably the most important figure in Mexico during the early stage of the Mexican Revolution, and yet remains one of its least understood. In his richly detailed biography *Orozco*, Raymond Caballero tries to make sense of Orozco’s complicated and contradictory history, from his childhood in the sierra of northwestern Mexico to his execution on a Texas ranch as an “anonymous” bandit. The revolution’s greatest hero, by turning on Francisco Madero and joining the treacherous Victoriano Huerta, Orozco became one of its most terrible villains. From a distance, Orozco’s career seems the epitome, nearly a caricature of revolutionary cynicism: he spoke the language of popular revolution—of anti-imperialism, of ending boss rule, and land reform—while being bankrolled by the oligarchy. In this view, Orozco, once glorious, was hollowed out by naked, material self-interest, just like the revolution itself. Caballero does not try to rescue Orozco, but through a fine-grained retelling of Orozco’s life story, he paints a picture of a man not so much driven by self-interest as inescapably bound by his cultural milieu.

Blending some archival material with memoirs from the era, Caballero tells a pretty simple, somewhat familiar story. Caballero does not theorize much but grounds Orozco in the Serrano culture of the Chihuahuan highlands. Orozco was undeniably part of the culture he was born into—a hard, working-class culture of ranchers, muleteers, and miners—but he always stood apart. He was literate, he was a Protestant, and he was

comparatively prosperous as a muleteer and a shop owner—all of which made him a “natural leader” to his peers. Caballero does little to explicate what this means, representing Orozco as a historical free agent: all decisions, even the most contradictory, were made by Orozco alone, and the political and the personal are inextricably intertwined. Caballero challenges the conventional wisdom that Orozco was a “small-bore intellect” manipulated by the “urbane, wealthy, and genteel” to unwittingly do their bidding. “Orozco was undeniably Intelligent,” Caballero asserts, “he could not be limited in intelligence and have organized, recruited, armed, and led the large numbers of men he commanded” (225). And yet Caballero attributes some of Orozco’s worst decisions to the undue influence of Gonzalo Enrile, a bagman for the Chihuahuan oligarchy. Enrile feted Orozco and enflamed his anti-American sentiments (at the behest of his bosses), leading him to his demise. Rather than Orozco’s presumed naivete, Caballero attributes Orozco’s poor decision-making to his desire to keep his men in the field.

Although Caballero does not make a meal out of it, it becomes clear throughout his narrative that Orozco was driven primarily by “disdain and bitterness,” itself a product of his Serrano milieu. Orozco and men like him made the revolution through decisive action, only to find themselves passed over by “platonic revolutionaries” who stood on the sidelines until the fighting was over. “Almost anyone would have been pleased to have become a national idol, to have international fame, and to have achieved the rank of division general when barely thirty-one,” Caballero notes, “but not Orozco, who was bitter over his fate” (226). Steeped in rugged, Serrano masculinity, Orozco found in Francisco Madero a perfect foil for his resentment. Madero was a prototypical “dandy”: small in stature, with a high-pitched voice, interminably indecisive—all characteristics that disqualified him as a leader in Orozco’s eyes. Frustrated with Madero’s command, Orozco famously circumvented Madero’s orders in Ciudad Juárez and even attempted to arrest him. While the two publicly mended their relationship, Orozco’s antipathy for Madero did not escape the attention of an oligarchy desperate to put the brakes on Madero’s reforms.

Pascual Orozco has never been elevated to Mexico’s revolutionary pantheon of national heroes, in large part because he did not have a fixed ideology. Emiliano Zapata became an undeniable symbol of Mexico’s peasant class, immediately associated with radical land reform, while Orozco, driven by hatred and personal resentment, faded into comparative obscurity. However, even if Caballero stops short of making the claim, one could say that Orozco’s career represents something larger: he symbolizes the cultural struggle that took place within the revolutionary coalition in the first phase of the revolution, the struggle between the young, anonymous men who took the initiative, and the platonic, middle-class notables who surpassed them. This does not make him a hero, but there are important lessons to be learned from Orozco’s story.

Between 1926 and 1929, Catholic rebels took up arms against the anticlerical government of President Plutarco Elías Calles. For years the Cristero War was virtually ignored in the historiography, and its supporters dismissed as religious fanatics. Since the 1970s, studies of the Cristero War have multiplied, and interpretations of the Cristeros themselves have expanded to reveal dense webs of social, political, cultural, and religious networks that informed ordinary peoples’ decisions to participate (either as a Cristero or a *federal*), abstain, or abscond. These dense networks are the subject of Nathaniel Morris’s *Soldiers, Saints, and Shamans*. For Morris, the Cristero War is an entry point into a much larger and longer history of political and cultural mediation between the region of the Gran Nayar and the state. More specifically, Morris traces the state’s encroachment into the political and social lives of the myriad indigenous communities of the Gran Nayar, and the gradual erosion of local *costumbre*, in favor of bonds to the expanding postrevolutionary state.

Because the region was only minimally integrated into the body politic in the nineteenth century, this modernization story begins rather late, with the arrival of the

Constitutionalist Army, and continues through the influx of state-sponsored teachers, agronomists, and militiamen in the 1920s and 1930s, who drove a wedge between (and often within) the region's small, isolated communities. Access to federal arms, land, and education fostered the growth of a new class of organic mediators, mostly bicultural young men from the region, whose new authority challenged traditional indigenous, cargo-based hierarchies. The conflict between "cosmopolitans" and "conservatives," as Morris labels them respectively, defined the region's response to the Cristero War. While these cleavages were not created by war, it did amplify them and bring them into more pronounced relief.

The primary contribution of *Soldiers, Saints, and Shamans* is to place the Gran Nayar on our "mental maps of the period" (11). Morris makes the region—twenty thousand square kilometers that encompasses the geographic extremes of four states in northwestern Mexico—the central character in his narrative. And for good reason: the region itself is fascinating. Rugged, sparsely populated, and spread out over several states, the Gran Nayar's relatively few inhabitants are among the most ethnically diverse in northern Mexico, consisting of four predominant language groups: the Naayar of Nayarit, the Waxitarite of Jalisco, and the O'Dam and Mexicanero of Durango. What little historiography the region has generated conceals as much as it reveals: in lieu of archival material, the communities have been reduced to "closed" or "untarnished" at best and "a mystical backwater" at worst. Morris thus employs the *cristiada* as both a historical window into the region and a means to integrate it into the trajectory of national history. Using an anthro-historical approach borrowed from Paul Friedrich, Morris supplements archival documentation with "participant observation, gossip, [and] common sense" gleaned from oral historical fieldwork.⁷ The goal is to unpack "the magical ways of understanding the world" that guided the communities of the Gran Nayar work out their relations with greater Mexican society (7).

By examining how the people of the region negotiated their position vis-à-vis the Cristeros, Morris has produced a remarkable study of the region, "a fine-grained, microhistorical analysis of change and continuity in the Gran Nayar" that accounts for the experiences of an unfathomable number of historically marginalized communities, and retells their stories in rich detail (13). The density of the detail often buries the analysis, but it also reveals the meticulous care of a deeply empathetic historian, duty bound to write the story of a people "without history." Ultimately, Morris's greatest asset is his ability to elucidate the vicissitudes of the daily lives of ordinary people in one of Mexico's most remote regions during its most tumultuous times.

In *Fighting Cristeros*, Mark Lawrence also looks beyond the Cristero heartland to capture the "everyday experiences of religious conflict in rural Mexico" (3). Lawrence applies the methodology of New Military History to the Cristero Rebellion, moving the focus away from campaigns, leaders, and strategies, and more toward the lived realities of asymmetrical warfare. To do so, he fills out more traditional military archival source materials with an eclectic mix of local sources, including oral histories. It is only here, Lawrence claims, that we can locate counterhegemonic stories—"history that diverges from official history"—within military history. Lawrence is interested in how the Cristero War affected civil-military relations in central-western Mexico and how irregular warfare affected the lives of noncombatants. More specifically, he examines how different competing forces interacted with different rural communities and how relations between different sectors of the military affected the topography of popular responses to both the Cristeros and the *federales*.

⁷ Paul Friedrich, *The Princes of Naranja: An Essay in Anthrohistorical Method* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), 216.

Lawrence's study is broken up into battlefronts and home fronts. The first two chapters on battlefronts are more chronological, focusing on the progression of the Cristero rebellion in those areas engulfed in heavy combat. While this is ostensibly the first regional study of the Cristero War in the state of Zacatecas, the actual geography is fairly nebulous, covering mostly the area around and across the state's border with the more frequently studied state of Jalisco. Lawrence demonstrates that as the area became engulfed in full-scale civil war, the battlefronts were increasingly characterized by loosely regulated and often locally recruited paramilitaries as the federal effort shifted from the army to the *defensas sociales*. The Cristeros, for their part, were always loosely commanded. The result was a war defined more by a lack of discipline and matériel than anything else, both of which made communities in the hot zone targets for reprisals, pillage, and forced appropriations. Nothing embodied the distress of low-intensity warfare more fully than the federal reconcentration program, by which all civilians in the combat zone were forcibly relocated to nearby cities. A policy aimed at isolating the Cristeros, it not only added to their ranks but also spread malnutrition and disease as it depopulated the area.

Lawrence's best work is in those areas outside of the red zone. Here he drives home the overwhelming hardship of irregular warfare and the strain it placed on civil-military relations. Specifically, Lawrence examines the way the war affected the everyday lives of noncombatants by tracing the massive economic strains inflicted on rural communities, even far away from combat. The federal government's counterinsurgency campaign depleted municipal revenues by reducing the tax base of many rural communities (through out-migration, both voluntary and involuntary) while diverting what little funds continued to exist to pay for the war. At the same time, the constant harassment of roads and railroads decimated the region's economic infrastructure, sinking commerce and reducing the region's access to basic staples. The arrival of formal military garrisons did not bring much-needed stability but created tensions with standing authorities who, oftentimes, simply abandoned their posts, allowing federal officers to usurp public functions, and leaving federal troops and *defensas* above the law. In these communities, the presence of off-duty soldiers and paramilitaries transformed social life, as alcohol consumption, prostitution, and sexual assault surged.

What this book lacks in creating a sense of time and space, it makes up for in "local color and detail" (4). It is a close examination of general rural life in conditions of asymmetrical warfare, and Lawrence paints a vivid picture, especially of the everyday experience of warfare for ordinary people. While the analysis ends in 1929, Lawrence's thick description of dislocations, hardships, and memories of the first Cristero War make clear why in central-western Mexico the so-called revolutionary compact would take some time to work out.

So, why did some join the Cristeros while others joined the federales? Both Morris and Lawrence find that the matrix for making this decision was contingent, contextual, and constrained by the dearth of resources. As often as not, small rural populations often sided with whoever could offer them protection from the horrors of war—cattle rustling, forced loans, confiscations, and retributive violence. The need for security (or, conversely, the thirst for pillage) amid widespread violence could lead them to either side, depending on the alignment of local intermediaries (*caciques*). In the Gran Nayar, Morris argues, in communities with *caciques* aligned with state initiatives—land reform, public education, or the *defensas sociales*—resistance to federal reforms was leavened. In those communities where traditional, cargo-based authorities persisted, the Cristero War gave them—for the first time—extralocal and even national allies, by which they could leverage popular support for warding off the encroaching state. Here, Morris argues, the protection of local *costumbre*, cemented in local (or even sublocal) *mitote* ceremonies, was the primary determinant of political decision-making. While Lawrence's analysis is distinctly more materialist, his conclusions regarding the centrality of *caciquismo* are similar.

The role of Catholicism in mobilizing the Cristero movement has been the subject of tremendous debate over the years. While early studies directly linked Catholicism with Cristero militancy, more recent studies have treated the Catholic Church's role in the movement as more an expression of local politics than an active determinant. Neither Lawrence nor Morris focuses on the role of the church in the Cristero War per se, but that does not preclude the importance of religion or religious practice more broadly imagined. In his study of home fronts, Lawrence recognizes the centrality of Catholic practice and the social role of the Church in "liberated" Cristero zones. In these areas, Catholicism was front and center—Catholic ceremony remained public, dancing and alcohol were prohibited, and tithing persisted. Moreover, Lawrence notes, "the nine states with the highest density of priests per capita in 1910 . . . form a near-perfect geography of the Cristero revolt" (92–93). In contrast, Morris finds that, counterintuitively, those who supported the Cristeros in the Gran Nayar tended to be the most explicitly anti-Catholic. Those who most actively and successfully protected their pagan religious practices and beliefs found strange bedfellows in the Cristeros, with whom they aligned nominally to safeguard the religious *costumbres* that formed the core of their identities. In neither case does the Catholic "fanaticism" that characterized early accounts of the Cristero movement seem to characterize those identified as Cristeros.

Anticlericalism and "counterrevolution"

The origins of the Cristero War can be traced to a long history of church-state conflict that directly shaped the religiopolitical ideology of the Cristeros. Marisa Pérez de Sarmiento and Robert Weis examine the historical antecedents of armed church-state conflict, approaching Catholicism as something more substantial than a reflection of political power. In *Los mensajeros de Job*, Pérez examines the rise of the state anticlericalism in the Yucatán through the letters of its exiled archbishop, Martín Tritschler y Córdova. When the constitutionalists took control of the national government in 1914, Tritschler fled to Havana, where he remained for five years, keeping track of the day-to-day functions of the archdiocese through frequent correspondence with his secretary and other church functionaries who remained behind. His letters also track Governor Salvador Alvarado's radical "defanaticization" campaign, giving us a view of radical anticlericalism—the forced seizure of church assets, the repurposing of church properties for civil functions, the expulsion of priests, the regulation of ceremonial life, and the occasional destruction and desecration of sacred images—from the perspective of the clergy. As much as anything, the letters illuminate the extraordinary resilience of the prelates in Mérida who labored strenuously to maintain a modicum of normalcy in the face of constant harassment. What is most striking in all this is the near-complete absence of resistance.

Archbishop Tritschler, Pérez demonstrates, was a man of his milieu. Born to a German father and a Mexican mother in the wake of La Reforma, he was educated in Rome, receiving his holy orders in 1891, the same year Pope Leo XIII issued the encyclical *Rerum novarum*. The church's new direction favored conciliation with the state over confrontation and stressed unity among Christians. This was especially true in Tritschler's native Mexico, where civil war between liberals and conservatives (known as La Reforma) had driven a deep wedge between the church and the state. Through its lay organizations, the church expanded its participation in civil society while encouraging parishioners to participate in alleviating the stress of acute poverty through acts of philanthropy. In this spirit, Tritschler forged "una alianza progresista" with President Porfirio Díaz in which he worked with the governor of Yucatán to expand the church's presence in the secular life of the province. His relationship with Díaz (and his wife) was such that Díaz recommended Tritschler to be archbishop of Mexico in 1906 (a charge Tritschler politely refused). Tritschler had never

experienced the persecution or the open conflict that characterized the Wars of La Reforma, and thus was seemingly unprepared to deal with the second wave of the revolution and the aggressive anticlericalism of the constitutionalist faction. Like most of Mexico's archbishops, Tritschler left the country shortly after Huerta did and remained in exile for nearly the entire duration of the constitutionalist regime. Moreover, even as Governor Alvarado chiseled away at the church's power and reduced its presence, Tritschler said nothing. "Si alguna vez había levantado la voz en unión de los miembros del episcopado, esto había ocurrido en protestas y pastorales colectivas," writes Sarmiento, "pero que individualmente 'calló' por creer que así se lo exigía 'la prudencia cristiana'" (214). The next generation of Catholics—those who came of age in this era of persecution—could be forgiven for seeing the archbishop's silence as an allegory for a church in retreat.

The next generation of Catholics is precisely the subject of Robert Weis's brilliant book, *For Christ and Country*—a penetrating examination of rising Catholic militancy in the mid-1920s. Activists of this era blamed surging anticlericalism on the conciliation of *Rerum novarum* Catholics, which not only ceded sacred ground to secular authorities but also emboldened revolutionaries to pursue more severe restrictions against Catholic practice. Aimed at regulating Catholic observance and furthering the separation of church and state, the 1926 reform to the Penal Code, known as the "Calles Law," criminalized piety in the minds of practicing Catholics, forcing them, Weis argues, to choose between allegiance to God and obedience to the law. The policing of the overt signs of Catholicism affected the daily lives of ordinary middle-class citizens, many of whom ordered their social lives around religious practice. New forms of legal harassment, while never particularly uniform or formal, drove the laity underground into clandestine convents and new lay groups often organized and attended to by local priests. There, in the underground, many young Catholics began to adopt a particularly radical version of Catholicism in response to both state repression and new trends in popular culture.

Catholic activists in Mexico City feared that consumer culture and its myriad public expressions were seducing the city's youth, who had been left unmoored by receding Catholicism. The allure of new music, dancing, and slick fashions feminized young men and stole the virtue of young women, rendering them morally incapable of halting the government's full-scale revolution against the nation's Catholic essence. A new, heartier generation of young Catholics was needed to reassert the Mexico's spiritual integrity and reverse the wave of secularization unleashed by La Reforma and consolidated by the postrevolutionary state. In Mexico City, these mostly male activists had come of age in an era of religious persecution, were activated in middle-class parochial schools, and later came together in the private homes of lay Catholics once religious practice was driven underground.

Weis's reconstruction of the social topography of these clandestine convents and private prayer groups is the centerpiece of the book. Private homes in humble, middle-class neighborhoods on the edge of town, like Santa María de la Ribeira, became informal spaces for young Catholics to meet, participate in publicly prohibited rituals, and share their increasingly radical religious beliefs. Prayer groups became surrogate families and, in some cases, became incubators for violent political conspiracies. At the house of the infamous Madre Conchita, young, usually unmarried and downwardly mobile men, often new arrivals to the city, formed a small but dedicated phalanx of "clumsy terrorists" devoted to restoring the Catholic Church to its natural place in the national imaginary.

José de León Toral fit the profile of a militant Catholic: he was in his midtwenties, bounced around jobs, joined the Asociación Católica de Juventud Mexicana (Catholic Youth), and became a regular guest at Madre Conchita's house. "His engagement with theology" was always devout, writes Weis, but "more heartfelt than intellectual" (116). After the execution of his mentor (who had attempted to assassinate former president Álvaro Obregón), León Toral dedicated himself to becoming a martyr. On July 17, 1928,

León Toral shot and killed Obregón. He worked alone and was apprehended immediately. He had made no attempt to escape; he relished the opportunity to illustrate the depths of his devotion. Government lawyers, for their part, used the trial as an opportunity to prove that the revolution had successfully yielded a new society subject to institutions and laws, despite the resistance of an increasingly militant clergy. To do so, the state's lawyers portrayed León Toral as a vulnerable wimp—a proxy for the stultified young men who had been used by Catholic activists to push their fanatical agenda. The state won the case—León Toral, after all, wanted nothing more than to be executed—but Weis argues that the trial failed as a showcase. Because the state failed to impose its narrative on the trial, León Toral became a martyr for the aggrieved Catholic middle class. As a state ritual, Weis points out, it was pretty ramshackle, perhaps a reflection of the state itself, which clearly demonstrated the power to kill but not to make itself legitimate.

Both books blend engrossing narratives with a keen eye for detail to reconstruct the cultural milieu of Catholic practice in two radically different places at radically different times (though separated by only a decade). Both take religious belief and religiosity seriously, giving them humanity and exploring their importance in quotidian life. Taken together, the books demonstrate the logics in play in determining who resisted, how, and when, creating a model for historians seeking to elucidate how the lives of ordinary people illuminate extraordinary historical events.

Communism and revolution

The final two books examine the other end of the political spectrum: the relationship between the state and communism. In *Edición y comunismo*, Sebastián Rivera Mir examines the life cycles of a number of small, ephemeral, nominally communist presses and publishing houses in postrevolutionary Mexico. By focusing on smaller print operations that have eluded historical analysis, Rivera Mir illustrates in vivid detail the impact of both national and international politics on the quotidian practices of the independent leftist press. Reconstructing press catalogs, Rivera Mir is able not only to trace what different *ediciones* published over time but also to reconstruct the cultural milieu of radical print culture in Mexico City. “La producción, circulación y recepción de los impresos fue una tarea que incluyó a una parte importante de los miembros del comunismo,” Rivera Mir writes, “tanto a los profesionales de la política, como a los nuevos integrantes que comenzaban recién su camino en la organización” (189). The logistics and practices of small-scale printing and distribution occupy center stage in Rivera Mir's analysis, along with the historical actors who breathed life into the presses, publishing houses, and bookstores that made Mexico “uno de los principales editores de marxismo en América Latina” (44).

Rivera Mir traces Mexico's emergence as a center of leftist printed material to three overlapping developments. First, in the mid-1930s, the relationship between the Mexican state and communism changed dramatically. Before 1934, the Calles regime actively suppressed the opposition press, limiting the reach of communist propaganda. In response, Rivera Mir demonstrates, small leftist presses were forced to become “no tan roja” in order to remain viable, distancing themselves from the formal Mexican Communist Party (PCM) and establishing autonomy from its mandates and structures. With the election of Lázaro Cárdenas, who brought a more cooperative attitude toward the Communist Party and the opposition press, printing presses, publishing houses, and bookstores specializing in Marxist material moved from the underground to the public sphere, often aided by direct collaboration with the Secretaría de Educación Pública; the number of PCM militants grew exponentially, creating a labor pool for the production and distribution of propaganda; and the relationship between the communist press and the

Communist Party was formalized by Editorial Popular, whose output reached unprecedented levels, as literacy rates skyrocketed, especially in Mexico City. As printed material became more vital than ever to the communist agenda in Mexico, print culture became increasingly industrialized.

Second, international communism shifted to a popular-front ideology, abandoning the Bolshevization policies of its Third Period, which, in Mexico, constricted PCM membership to a few committed militants and forcibly homogenized the kinds of printed materials available to would-be leftists. Communist texts in Mexico (and all of Latin America) were translated and published almost exclusively in Spanish and limited to primary sources—the writings of Marx and Comintern’s internal reports. When Comintern shifted course in 1935, calling for working-class unity, the number of militant communists in Mexico increased, and so did the range of texts printed and made available in Mexico. After 1935, Editorial Popular began publishing original material written in multiple languages, and dealing with a wide range of contemporary issues relevant to Mexican workers. For many militants, Rivera Mir explains, this was a double-edged sword: on the one hand, Editorial Popular’s expanded catalog appealed to a wider public, which triggered a boost in membership, activity, and revenues; on the other hand, as less doctrinaire material became available, they feared newly indoctrinated members would lack the ideological rigor of the older generation.

Finally, in the 1930s Mexico City became a veritable melting pot of refugees of the international Left. The Spanish Civil War drove many Republicans into exile in Mexico City, where they were joined by prominent Latin Americans fleeing political persecution who had found shelter in Cárdenas’s Mexico. Often leveraging their advanced education and reputations as “emigrados proselitistas” (35), leftist immigrants were easily integrated into the framework of the Mexican print world, frequently taking key roles as writers, publishers, and translators. Many came with publishing experience, making exile a key force in communist print culture just as it was becoming increasingly professional and industrial.

Rivera Mir’s book offers a fascinating look into the world of small, independent publishing at a time of great ferment for the international left. His commitment to lesser-known presses and publishing houses, limited by lack of funds, state repression, and the Communist Party itself, brings into full relief the autonomy (or isolation) with which they worked and the seemingly endless font of creativity they tapped into to forge a uniquely Mexican press.

One person Mexico’s communist press notably did not publish was Vicente Lombardo Toledano—a reflection of his complicated relationship with communism (and especially the PCM) and the working classes. In her biography *In Combat*, Daniela Spenser deconstructs Lombardo Toledano’s hagiography without representing him as a historical villain. “In life,” she writes, “he aroused feelings of love and hate; he was the object of royal welcomes and the target of several attacks . . . Those who knew him still evoke his incendiary oratorical style, which others remember as soporific” (1–2). This is the image of Lombardo Toledano that Spenser zeroes in on: he was a government patsy and a radical apparatchik, a born elitist and a mover of the masses, and a devout Marxist who consistently carried water for the state. Tracing his life in minute detail, Spenser reconstructs the story of a man whose life was an inescapable paradox.

Lombardo Toledano’s political career was, in many ways, a perfect melding of the personal and the political. Spenser shows him to be a deeply intellectual man whose political ideology transformed over time, often in response to opportunities for advancement. He began as a managerial capitalist—a moderate reformer who believed that the market could be manipulated to better serve the working classes. As the revolutionary state began to consolidate in the 1930s, he became an ardent socialist, committed to socialist education just as Comintern began to walk back its Bolshevism.

Lombardo Toledano's ideological transformation owed in great part to the impact of the Soviet Union on his political ideology. Spenser, who has been writing about the influence of international communism in Mexico for decades, focuses on Lombardo Toledano's visit to the Soviet Union in 1935. He came away from his visit with a rose-tinted perspective on Soviet socialism that would order his thoughts on politics for decades to come.

A central theme of *In Combat* is Lombardo Toledano's deep and abiding belief in the importance of the cultural elite in leading the masses and his optimism about its power to do so. Lombardo Toledano was pessimistic about the capacity of the subordinate classes to autonomously discern, articulate, and defend their self-interest. This was, in his mind, the role of the educated elite, who were in turn a manifestation or a reflection of the popular will itself. Lombardo Toledano's metaphysical interpretation of the relationship between the bourgeoisie and the masses was present early in his career, but combined with his burgeoning admiration for the Soviet Union, it blossomed into a form of state fetishism. His belief in the state as "the highest form of human organization and the best agent in the emancipation of the working classes" (54) tied him seemingly irrevocably to the emerging *priísta* state, even as it moved further and further from his purported ideals. This was the ultimate paradox of Lombardo Toledano's career and what makes him a perfect allegory for twentieth-century Mexico itself.

The end of the revolution

Nearly all the books under review allude explicitly or implicitly to the so-called revolutionary compact—that elusive moment when social conflict and contentious collective action gave way to a stable, predictable state. In Mexico, as we have seen, lingering antagonisms, the debris of decades of conflict and low-intensity violence, mitigated against any sort of peaceful accord. As a result, the end of the revolution in Mexico is synonymous and simultaneous to the foundation of a decidedly unrevolutionary state. As mentioned earlier, the origins of the PRI have been the subject of renewed scholarly interest in the past decade, as the state formation literature of the previous decade has shifted in an attempt to explain the everyday ways the PRI consolidated its authority without resorting to widespread violence. *Unrevolutionary Mexico*—Paul Gillingham's examination of the origins of the PRI—represents the state of the art of the new literature on Mexico's *dictablanda*. Of course, there was no magic moment when the revolution yielded to the "strange dictatorship" of the PRI; rather, Gillingham expertly shows, it was the product of several intertwined and overlapping processes that took place over the decade between 1945 and 1955, by which "both uncertainty and instability declined dramatically" even as elections became less transparent and less contested.

Gillingham uses the disparate histories of two southern states—Guerrero and Veracruz—to demonstrate how the emerging PRI maintained stability, balancing force and consent, while expanding federal authority into the provincial countryside. While some historians close the revolutionary era at the end of Cárdenas's presidency, Gillingham shows definitively that by the early 1940s no revolutionary settlement had been struck in Guerrero or Veracruz. In Guerrero, a state with few natural resources and little infrastructure, Gillingham argues that in 1940, the state government had less control than it did before the revolution: it did not toe the party line, did not implement federal policy, and could not control violence or avoid using violence to affect its loose social control. In Veracruz, a state with abundant resources and infrastructure, local and regional politicians could afford to ignore the federal government, forming powerful *camarillas* who used their own networks of *pistoleros* to defend their interests, producing a deeply fragmented and violent political space.

Between 1945 and 1955, however—most clearly during the *sexenio* of Miguel Alemán—the federal government (or perhaps better put, the party) began to eat away at the informal networks and practices that circumvented and destabilized formal political systems at the expense of civil authorities. By the early 1950s, state politics in Guerrero and Veracruz had fallen in line with the PRI and the president, bearing the earmarks of Mexico's new, undemocratic democracy: there was civilian authority over the military, caciques and other “entrepreneurs of violence” were separated from the military and often purged violently, and peasant *ligas* and labor unions dropped out of formal politics in exchange for economic stability and a sense of security. As a result, businessmen and state employees took over state politics while the middle class took over local politics, and all recognized state bureaucracy as the best and safest path to upward mobility.

Gillingham skillfully synthesizes a multitude of extraordinarily detailed, small stories gleaned from municipal archives into a big story about the PRI's consolidation of its authority in the *provincia*. His overarching narrative reveals an uneven process, affected more easily and completely in some places than others, but one that left a discernible pattern from which we can draw some larger conclusions. Over time the popular voice—measured in both popular acclamation and public opinion—became less important as party regulations limited competition and diversity within the PRI, driving down public interest in elections in general. As disillusionment grew, elections and the ability to *traer gente* became less important to affecting political outcomes. At the same time, the PRI subverted the informal entrepreneurs of violence by professionalizing state police forces and forcibly incorporating or liquidating the networks of military commanders and *pistoleros* who brought them to power. The effect of this was twofold: it drove down the homicide rate in the countryside, and it isolated the military. Left vulnerable to civilian rule, the military settled for regional autonomy (and endless opportunities for graft) in exchange for loyalty to the regime and effective counterinsurgency when necessary. By marginalizing the popular classes from politics and subordinating the military, and doing so while curbing the violence that plagued the countryside for decades, the PRI brought an end to the revolution and its aftershocks and ushered in an era in which political outcomes were no longer determined by overt violence. No book to date has outlined this process as clearly and vividly—and in all its bewildering complexity—as *Unrevolutionary Mexico*.

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