

THE MEXICAN REVOLUTION AT ITS CENTENNIAL

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- Mexicans in Revolution, 1910–1946: An Introduction.** By William H. Beezley and Colin M. MacLachlan. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009. Pp. viii + 200. \$20.00 paper. ISBN: 9780803224476.
- Populism in Twentieth Century Mexico: The Presidencies of Lázaro Cárdenas and Luis Echeverría.** Edited by Amelia M. Kiddle and María L. O. Muñoz. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2010. Pp. xvi + 296. \$55.00 cloth. ISBN: 9780816529186.
- From Many, One: Indians, Peasants, Borders, and Education in Callista Mexico, 1924–1935.** By Andrae M. Marak. Calgary, AB: University of Calgary Press, 2009. Pp. xxviii + 220. \$34.95 paper. ISBN: 9781552382509.
- Photographing the Mexican Revolution: Commitments, Testimonies, Icons.** By John Mraz. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012. Pp. x + 336. \$45.00 cloth. ISBN: 9780292735804.
- Gender and the Mexican Revolution: Yucatán Women and the Realities of Patriarchy.** By Stephanie J. Smith. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009. Pp. xi + 272. \$27.50 paper. ISBN: 9780807859537.
- Revolutionary Parks: Conservation, Social Justice, and Mexico's National Parks, 1910–1940.** By Emily Wakild. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2011. Pp. xiii + 235. \$26.95 paper. ISBN: 9780816529575.

The 2010 centennial of the Mexican Revolution provided an occasion for reflection on a topic that remains one of the most heavily researched topics in Latin American history. Placing aside the obvious interest in the revolution among Mexicans, the first social revolution of the twentieth-century world has long fascinated historians from North America and Europe. In the 1980s, the publication of five grand syntheses in English, French, and German revealed a sophisticated historiography rich in local and regional nuance.¹ Since then, the torrent of new scholarship has never let up, even as historians discovered the postrevolutionary

1. Alan Knight, *The Mexican Revolution*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); François-Xavier Guerra, *Le Mexique de l'ancien régime à la révolution* (Paris: Harmattan, 1985); John M. Hart, *Revolutionary Mexico: The Coming and Process of the Mexican Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987); Ramón Ruíz, *The Great Rebellion: Mexico, 1905–1924* (New York: Norton, 1982); Hans-Werner Tobler, *Die mexikanische Revolution: Gesellschaftlicher Wandel und sozialer Umbruch, 1876–1940* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1984).

decades, and most notably the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, as a new and fertile ground for scholarship.

Given this ongoing scholarly interest, it is no coincidence that this review of Anglophone scholarship on the Mexican Revolution appears just five years after Mark Wasserman's 2008 article in *Latin American Research Review*.² Wasserman referred to four significant historiographical trends: the turn toward regional and local history, the focus on subaltern agency, the rise of the "new cultural history," and the commitment to study gender (and sexuality, one might add) as an important analytical category. Two of the books under review in the present essay, *From Many, One* and *Gender in the Mexican Revolution*, fall into Wasserman's second and fourth categories, respectively. Three other books address themes that have emerged as new scholarly foci: the environment (*Revolutionary Parks*), visual culture (*Photographing the Mexican Revolution*), and the legacy of the revolution (*Populism in Twentieth-Century Mexico*).³ The final book, *Mexicans in Revolution*, is a synthesis geared toward an undergraduate student audience.

THE LONGER REVOLUTION (AND ITS POLITICAL ICONS)

This synthesis is an apt starting point. Its major aim is to counterbalance the criticism of the revolution that has dominated the scholarly literature since the 1968 massacre of student protesters in Tlatelolco, Mexico City. The massacre showed that the revolution had ended badly. It tarnished not only the ruling Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), a party that claimed to represent the achievements of the revolution, but also the way historians viewed the revolutionary process itself. Scholars now focused on the failure of revolutionary leaders and their successors to bring democracy and social justice to Mexico after the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz (1876–1911). Reflecting on this critique, *Mexicans in Revolution* seeks to "restore vitality to the study of the revolutionaries and their programs" (vii), and it does so primarily by analyzing the protagonists and their policies. William H. Beezley and Colin M. MacLachlan strive to understand the revolutionaries on their own terms rather than through a teleological lens, constructing a master narrative informed significantly by the actions and thoughts of the "great men" (and women) of the revolution, balanced by captivating descriptions of daily life and culture.

Mexicans in Revolution takes the rhetoric of revolutionary leaders seriously, at the very least as a "public transcript" against which ordinary people could define their place in the revolution. In the words of the authors, the revolutionaries pursued "significant national reforms" and "shaped the destiny of their nation across the twentieth century" (1). The social rights embodied in the 1917 Constitution structured political discourse, especially article 27, regarding ownership of land and the subsoil, and article 123, addressing the rights of workers. Although these articles never found full implementation, they helped encourage campesinos and

2. 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.

3. For full disclosure, I have an essay in this collection.

workers to fight for their rights. They also informed a series of reform measures culminating in President Lázaro Cárdenas's redistribution of forty-nine million acres of land, as well as the 1938 expropriation of the foreign-owned oil industry following a labor dispute. *Mexicans in Revolution* takes advantage of recent biographies that have refocused our attention on the original aims of the revolutionaries and how those objectives changed over time.⁴

In their conclusion, the authors propose an extension of the time frame for the revolution, dating it from 1910 to 1946, rather than to 1917, 1920, or 1940, the three watersheds most widely accepted as concluding the revolutionary era. These periodizations represent the framing of the revolutionary constitution; a coup d'état that ushered in the last violent change of government to date; and the end of the Cárdenas presidency, which marked a transition to the developmentalist strategies of the World War II era. Instead, *Mexicans in Revolution* presents a compelling argument for ending the revolutionary period with the ascendancy of a new generation of civilian politicians, which replaced the revolutionary generals who had held the presidency for all but two years from 1920 to 1946.⁵ However, the authors take this argument too far in proposing that the generational shift represented the arrival of a spoiled generation of *licenciados* raised in the shadows of their "rough-hewn, self-made" forebears (170). Revolutionary leaders Venustiano Carranza and Francisco I. Madero came from privileged backgrounds, and educated professionals played significant roles in all of the revolutionary factions as well as the national government.

In focusing on the revolution as a generational process, *Mexicans in Revolution* challenges the widespread labeling of the 1920s and 1930s as a "postrevolutionary" period. This periodization privileges the coup d'état led by three leaders from the northern state of Sonora—Adolfo de la Huerta, Álvaro Obregón, and Plutarco Elías Calles—as the turning point from the revolution to its aftermath. Derived from the idea that "the conflict [had] ended," as John Mraz put it in the introduction to his book (1), the label "postrevolutionary" suggests a regime capable of suppressing revolutionary violence. However, the Sonoran-led regime had to wage several wars to stay in power. In 1923, President Obregón confronted a rebellion led by none other than de la Huerta; beginning in 1926, President Calles simultaneously faced the Cristero War in central Mexico and a Yaqui insurrection in Sonora that tied down 20 percent of the Mexican army; and in 1929, General José Gonzalo Escobar led a rebellion against the government. The "postrevolutionary" label also isolates the Cárdenas years as a sudden revival of the revolution, followed by yet another retrenchment. Even more important, it devalues the cultural revolution that followed the military one of the 1910s. This cultural revolution led to the emergence of two different visions in violent and profound conflict with

4. Friedrich Katz, *The Life and Times of Pancho Villa* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998); Jürgen Buchenau, *Plutarco Elías Calles and the Mexican Revolution* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007).

5. For a similar periodization, see my *Mexican Mosaic: A Brief History of Mexico* (Wheeling, IL: Harlan Davidson, 2008).

one another—one secular and one Catholic. Emily Wakild aptly terms this period “the latter stages of the first social revolution of the twentieth century” (1).

One useful way of viewing Cardenista reforms as a part of this extended revolutionary process is by comparing them to reforms undertaken by a later presidential administration: that of Luis Echeverría Álvarez (1970–1976), who often portrayed himself as the redeemer of Cardenista values. *Populism in Twentieth-Century Mexico* does this by examining these two administrations as populist regimes that sought legitimacy by means of popular mobilization and a discourse of political inclusiveness. Both Cárdenas and Echeverría confronted serious political and economic crises, both broke with their predecessors, and both pursued policies designed to secure national control over natural resources and to bring underprivileged groups into the political process.

By way of a comparison with Echeverría, the collection sheds new light on the Cardenista blend of reformism and authoritarianism. The former represented a reawakening of the revolutionary dynamic by popular demand and by Cárdenas’s considerable political talent in allowing this dynamic just enough leeway to broaden his government’s base of support. As a result, Cárdenas co-opted representatives of the most important popular movements into Mexico’s “official” revolutionary party. This reorganization ultimately allowed the party, renamed the PRI in 1946, to crush independent social movements and to hold on to the presidency until 2000 (the PRI returned to power with its victory in the July 2012 elections). Hence where *cardenismo* remained malleable and fluid, the PRI state under Echeverría aspired to the exclusion and repression of its opponents. Made most expressly in the contributions from Alan Knight, Diane E. Davis, Michael Snodgrass, and Beezley, this comparison also emphasizes the genuine popular enthusiasm for cardenismo, as compared with the *priistas’* cynical manipulation of the people.

Populism in Twentieth-Century Mexico travels new ground in its examination of the Echeverría administration. For example, Alexander Aviña provides new insights into the Mexican dirty wars of the 1970s. These wars involved the brutal extermination of rural guerrilla fighters at the same time that Echeverría welcomed refugees from South American dictatorships. As Amelia M. Kiddle and Joseph U. Lenti show in their chapter, the president also attempted to gain political capital following Cárdenas’s death, which occurred several weeks before his inauguration.

A unique feature of this collection is the foreword by Lázaro Cárdenas’s son, Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas Solórzano, a three-time candidate for the presidency and one of the founders of the Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD), the most significant opposition party on the Left. Cárdenas’s piece contrasts the “popular” administration of his father with the “populist” Echeverría regime, ascribing to the former a genuine concern with the Mexican people, and to the latter, a need to manipulate a populace reeling from the Tlatelolco massacre. Given Cárdenas’s family ties, this cannot be an objective commentary, and the author somewhat overdraws the contrast between Mexico’s preeminent populists. Nonetheless, the essay’s criticism is on target. After six more years under President José López

Portillo, this new edition of populism ended in disaster, highlighted by the 1982 debt crisis and the ensuing catastrophic devaluation of the peso. This crisis ushered in the neoliberal era that, in turn, spurred Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas to break with the PRI and launch his first independent presidential bid in 1988.

With this in mind, it would have been interesting to connect Echeverría's populism to that of López Portillo, who declared on the eve of the devaluation of the peso that he would "defend the peso like a dog" and subsequently nationalized Mexico's banks.⁶ Further research might also look at yet another administration that made ample use of populist rhetoric and practice: that of President Adolfo López Mateos (1958–1964).

REVISITING MANY MEXICOS

In a counterpoint to master narratives that focus on the national level, it is commonplace to cite Lesley Byrd Simpson's classic *Many Mexicos* as an early historiographic recognition of Mexico's great diversity in geographic, ethnic, social, and cultural terms.⁷ Not surprisingly, regional studies still produce cutting-edge scholarship that not only complicates master narratives at the national level but also has begun to revise earlier works on the revolution as it unfolded at the regional level.

From Many, One is one example of such scholarship, examining the public education campaign in the era of Plutarco Elías Calles, conceived as the period encompassing his presidency (1924–1928) followed by his role as the informal *jefe máximo* of the Mexican Revolution (1928–1935). Using an interdisciplinary framework including political science and the study of education, Marak compares the border states of Sonora, Chihuahua, and Coahuila. This multistate approach is an interesting one, as most historians of the border region have focused on individual states or even smaller units of analysis. As a consequence of rapid economic growth induced by foreign investments in the Porfirian era, these states boasted relatively high literacy rates, yet they also featured a large number of indigenous communities that continued to resist assimilation and the seizure of their lands. As a result, efforts to sponsor nation building by means of education met with fierce resistance at the local level.

Like Mary Kay Vaughan's seminal study on public education in the 1930s, Marak finds that the ability of local leaders to assert a significant degree of autonomy in resisting federal and state-level directives compromised the goals of the administration.⁸ That was the case even in Sonora, Calles's home state, governed for three years by his eldest son, Rodolfo. However, as Marak demonstrates, the

6. Quoted in George W. Grayson, *Mexico: Narco-Violence and a Failed State?* (New York: Transaction Publishers, 2010), 42.

7. Lesley Byrd Simpson, *Many Mexicos* (New York: Putnam, 1941).

8. Mary Kay Vaughan, *Cultural Politics in Revolution: Teachers, Peasants, and Schools in Mexico, 1930–1940* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1998). See also Christopher R. Boyer, *Becoming Campesinos: Politics, Identity, and Agrarian Struggle in Postrevolutionary Michoacán, 1920–1935* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003).

state did put in place institutions and power brokers who would later help the PRI state assert its power in the border region.

Marak explores the conflict between Callista strategy and local response through a series of case studies: the federalization of the educational system in Chihuahua; frontier schools in Coahuila; and three indigenous communities: the Tarahumara in Chihuahua, the Seri in central Sonora, and the Tohono O'odham in northern Sonora. Marak's case studies make an important contribution. They reveal Calles's personal imprint on the state's education policies as by far the most anticlerical of the Sonoran leaders. A former schoolteacher, Calles viewed public education as the linchpin of the secular and nationalist reeducation of the Mexican people.

Like Marak, Stephanie Smith's *Gender in the Mexican Revolution* takes a subnational approach. Smith explores women's activism in the state of Yucatán during the governorships of General Salvador Alvarado (1915–1918) and Felipe Carrillo Puerto (1922–1924). This case spans the above-mentioned historiographic divide of 1920, and its bloody denouement with Carrillo Puerto's murder in January 1924 bolsters the argument for a longer time frame of revolution. Alone among his fellow governors of the Carranza era, Alvarado encouraged women's organizing as a way to help break the political power of the state's henequen oligarchy. Boasting huge profits, particularly during World War I, this oligarchy had resisted reforms and sheltered the revolution's enemies. A native of the northern state of Sinaloa imposed on the Yucatán as a military governor, Alvarado also sought the support of women (and particularly middle-class women from Mérida, the state capital) to make his rule respected. Finally, by encouraging the mobilization of women, and by abolishing—at least in theory—debt servitude and domestic slavery, Alvarado and the more radical Carrillo Puerto endeavored to weaken the power of the Catholic Church and to break forms of human bondage that impeded the modernization of the Yucatecan economy. Carrillo Puerto's sister Elvia, who had been married at the age of thirteen and widowed at the age of twenty-one, was the chief organizer of the feminist leagues in the state. Dubbed *la monja roja*, or “the red nun,” she became an iconic women's rights figure throughout Mexico.

Like Beezley and MacLachlan, Smith demonstrates the significance of human agency, in this case that of Yucatecan women from a variety of backgrounds. By means of an exhaustive study of court records, *Gender and the Mexican Revolution* persuasively argues that women took advantage of the new political spaces that the revolution had opened for them. Some used the revolutionary courts as a way to reopen legal cases against men who had deprived them of their honor, others took advantage of the liberalized divorce laws, and Catholic women fought the anticlericalism of the state.

Yet Smith also delineates the narrow limits of women's agency, aiming to deconstruct “the heroic feminist myth of the state,” as well as the notion that Yucatán constituted “the heart of Mexican radical feminism” (11). The revolutionary state government did not desire women's liberation, seeing women instead as instruments to pursue other political aims. Their rhetoric to the contrary, both Alvarado and Carrillo Puerto (as well as their associates) subscribed to and promoted

traditional gender roles. After Carrillo Puerto's assassination, women quickly lost much of the ground that they had gained. Henequen planters successfully lobbied the state government to curb the radicalism of female schoolteachers who intended to educate students about their rights under the revolutionary constitution. It is worth noting that the "feminist myth" of the state's leaders does not pervade all previous scholarship on revolutionary Yucatán. Rather, scholars have evaluated Alvarado's and Carrillo Puerto's policies toward women in comparative, contextualized terms. For example, Gilbert M. Joseph has pointed out that Alvarado's "approach to women's issues was revolutionary by the Mexican—and Western—standards of his time."⁹ Made thirty years ago, Joseph's cautious assertion remains valid, keeping in mind the failure of most state governments in the period 1915–1923 to address the situation of women much at all.

NEW HISTORIOGRAPHICAL FRONTIERS: ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY AND VISUAL CULTURE

The final two books reviewed in this essay strike out in new historiographic directions. Along with the works of historians such as Myrna Santiago and Chris Boyer, to name but a few, Emily Wakild's *Revolutionary Parks* belongs to a new wave of studies on the relationship between the Mexican environment and social and political movements in the era of the Mexican Revolution. John Mraz's latest book, *Photographing the Mexican Revolution*, analyzes photography and photographers as significant historical actors, joining Patrice Elizabeth Olsen and other historians who have analyzed architecture and visual culture.¹⁰

Revolutionary Parks analyzes the creation of forty national parks covering more than two million acres of land during the 1920s and 1930s, and particularly during the Cárdenas administration. According to Wakild, in 1940, Mexico boasted the greatest number of national parks in the world—a record that stands when counting solely the thirty-five national parks in the United States in existence at that time but excluding the national monuments, many of which would have been considered parks elsewhere. Explaining the impetus for their creation at a time of fiscal difficulties, the author argues that the "national parks were an outgrowth of revolutionary affinities for both rational science and social justice" (1).

A majority of the new national parks protected forested, mountainous areas within one hundred kilometers of Mexico City. *Revolutionary Parks* studies four parks as case studies: Ixtaccíhuatl-Popocatepetl, Lagunas de Zempoala, El Tepozteco, and La Malinche. Protecting these forests safeguarded the water supply of Mexico City's burgeoning population and preserved a stunning and unique landscape, in particular, the snowcapped volcanoes and picturesque forests that surround the Valley of Mexico. The Parque Nacional Ixtaccíhuatl-Popocatepetl,

9. Gilbert M. Joseph, *Revolution from Without: Yucatán, Mexico, and the United States, 1880–1940*, 2nd ed. (1982; Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 105.

10. On environmental history, see, for example, Myrna I. Santiago, *The Ecology of Oil: Environment, Labor, and the Mexican Revolution, 1900–1938* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Christopher R. Boyer, ed., *A Land between Waters: Environmental Histories of Modern Mexico* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2012). On architecture history, see Patrice Elizabeth Olsen, *Artifacts of Revolution: Architecture, Society, and Politics in Mexico City, 1920–1940* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2008).

perhaps the most famous of all the parks, was the first established by the Cárdenas administration and the third national park overall.

Yet Cárdenas and his principal forester, Miguel Ángel de Quevedo, remained mindful of their commitment to *agravista* causes. As a result, they balanced this conservationist effort—revolutionary indeed in an era that saw environmental degradation as the inevitable cost of modernization—against the need of indigenous communities to use the forests for their own purposes, such as hunting, farming, and the production of charcoal. By bringing federal agencies into direct contact with the residents of the parks, the national park system helped incorporate these indigenous communities into the emergent corporatist state. But the presence of the state in the national parks, as elsewhere, remained inconsistent, and particularly in the case of the Parque Nacional La Malinche, the local residents successfully resisted conservationist plans and directives that conflicted with their interests. In Wakild's words, the Cardenistas shared "a harmonious vision . . . of a landscape configured to draw out productivity from all of the population to benefit rural families and the national economy" (3).

Unfortunately, as Wakild demonstrates, the momentum toward conservation was short lived. During the last two years of the Cárdenas administration, the priorities of the Mexican government shifted toward privileging import-substitution industrialization and economic growth following the worldwide economic crisis of 1937, which occurred on the heels of the Great Depression. World War II only accentuated this trend toward growth at all costs. Mexico City's exponential growth degraded the natural environment in areas that became part of the metropolis and beyond, and government-sponsored conservation suffered a "slow and silent failure" (151).

The relationship between humans and their environment also plays a role in John Mraz's *Photographing the Mexican Revolution*, which masterfully analyzes the work of revolutionary-era photographers. Widely considered the preeminent expert on the history of Mexican photography, Mraz compiles and interprets more than two hundred photographs from the 1910s, including many hitherto-unknown images, along with several classic shots, such as the epic image of Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata in the National Palace, that have made their way into Mexican history textbooks (250). For that reason alone, this is a book worth buying, with the sole caveat that the quality of the reproduction of the photos leaves something to be desired. With much justification, Mraz focuses on Mexican photographers who contributed important visual images to our understanding of the revolution, rather than foreign observers.

As one of the book's most important contributions to scholarship, Mraz debunks the idea that the revolution had an "official" photographer in Agustín Víctor Casasola, whose photos rank among the most widely known images of Mexico's great upheaval. Instead, he demonstrates the importance of many less-well-known photographers, including women. Unnamed photographers produced many of the images attributed to Casasola, whose associates erased the original names from the negatives.

Another important theme in *Photographing the Mexican Revolution* is the partisan nature of revolution-era photography, hence the subtitle "Commitments,

Testimonies, Icons." As Mraz puts it, one must always ask, "Why was this photo made?" (3). Although photography, like film, insinuates authenticity, it is not any more objective than any other form of art. Some photographers belonged to one of the contending factions and sought to portray their subjects in a favorable way. On other occasions, a local cacique might subsidize a certain image or stipulate that a photographer could shoot a scene only in the way that he desired. These partisan photographers were as much part of the revolution as the men and women who did the actual fighting. There indeed was such a thing as "revolutionary photography": photography as agent and instrument in the revolution.

Thus Mraz looks at Mexican revolutionary photographs as a "double testimony": they tell us about the authors who made them, and they show us frozen fragments of past scenes" (8). During the era of the revolution, photography was an emerging technology. With film still in its infancy, it formed the cutting edge of revolutionary propaganda, and the Mexican Revolution was the first major upheaval to be extensively photographed. In a parallel sense, the uprising of the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN) on New Year's Day in 1994 was the beginning of a new age of social movements, as the EZLN leaders were the first insurgents to use the Internet to distribute their communiqués to the rest of the world. Ironically, their hero was Emiliano Zapata, one of the premier icons of the Mexican Revolution, whose image was shaped in part by his photographers.

Thus we come full circle in recognizing the long shadow of the Mexican Revolution—as evidenced by the PRI's recent triumph in the 2012 presidential elections—and the enduring significance of its icons. The books under review address two enduring historiographic themes: the role of icons, whether political, cultural, or geographical, and the study of regional history, which is facing a revisionist challenge of its own several decades after it debunked national paradigms. But they also incorporate new scholarly interests—the study of environmental history and visual culture, as well as a focus on the post-World War II period. There are still new questions to ask of Mexico's well-studied revolution, as well as new answers to be provided to old questions that appear to have been conclusively answered. As our understanding of the truly "postrevolutionary" decades increases, it will be interesting to see whether this deeper knowledge of the revolution's aftermath will occasion another rethinking.