

MEXICO:  
The Search for New Parameters

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- ESTADO Y SINDICALISMO EN MEXICO.* By Ilán Bizberg. (Mexico City: Colegio de México, 1990. Pp. 390.)
- MASTERING THE STRUGGLE: GENDER, ACTORS, AND AGRARIAN CHANGE IN A MEXICAN EJIDO.* By Dorien Brunt. (Amsterdam: Center for Latin American Research and Documentation, 1992. Pp. 225. \$28.75 paper.)
- THE CONTRADICTION ALLIANCE: STATE-LABOR RELATIONS AND REGIME CHANGE IN MEXICO.* By Ruth B. Collier. (Berkeley: International and Area Studies, University of California, Berkeley, 1992. Pp. 187. \$14.50 paper.)
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- UNIONS, WORKERS, AND THE STATE IN MEXICO.* Edited by Kevin J. Middlebrook. (La Jolla: Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies, University of California, San Diego, 1991. Pp. 149. \$18.95 paper.)
- MAESTROS EN MOVIMIENTO: TRANSFORMACIONES EN LA BUROCRACIA ESTATAL (1978-1982).* By Susan Street. (Mexico City: Secretaría de Educación Pública, 1992. Pp. 243.)
- CRONICA DEL SINDICALISMO EN MEXICO (1976-1988).* By Raúl Trejo Delarbre. (Mexico City: Siglo Veintiuno, 1990. Pp. 420.)
- THE UNIONIZATION OF THE MAQUILADORA INDUSTRY: THE TAMAULIPAN CASE IN NATIONAL CONTEXT.* By Edward J. Williams and John Passé-Smith. (San Diego: Institute for Regional Studies of the Californias, San Diego State University, 1992. Pp. 134. \$9.50.)

In the past ten years, sociological inquiry has undergone profound theoretical and methodological changes. These developments have ramifications for studying Latin American societies that have not yet been fully incorporated into scholarship. Among the most important are the shift away from two central dichotomies that implicitly or explicitly oriented work in the past: the dichotomy between state and society, and that between structure and process. In the first pair of concepts, a shift can be perceived away from locating agency a priori in the state or in society and toward adopting a complex, state-society network approach to the problem of agency and change.<sup>1</sup> In the second pair, giving priority to relations over categories transforms the concept of structure from a set of fixed constraints on individuals or collectivities into regular patterns of relations among these social units. Such units are viewed simultaneously as constraining behavior in the direction of established practices and opening up the possibility of new practices, depending on the historical convergences in which they are enacted.<sup>2</sup> As a result of this dual development, it is no longer necessary to choose between "causes" external to human volition (such as economic growth and urbanization) and agency, nor is it necessary to distinguish between theories explaining permanence and those accounting for change. Instead, scholars are faced with the relatively new problem of identifying complex networks of actors who, in the course of carrying out their private projects and strategies, may in some circumstances reproduce the established order but transform it in others.

Incorporating these paradigm shifts into the study of Mexico offers a special challenge. Although Mexico has long been a candidate for social and political transformation in analysts' eyes, its astounding political continuity has interposed severe obstacles to adopting a dynamic view of Mexican society.<sup>3</sup> An initial difficulty can be found in the tendency to see change as invariably directed from above and to relegate organized groups in society to the role of limited reactors to state initiatives. A second difficulty has arisen from treating collective actors as monolithic wholes inherently endowed with a clear logic and solid rationality (and sometimes, an unwavering knowledge of the future).

The second tendency has usually applied to characterizations of "the State," which has been presented in countless analyses in overly personalized terms (as in "the State thinks or does such and such"). But it

1. For a recent discussion of the theoretical debate on state versus society, see the articles by David N. Gibbs, G. John Ikenberry, Stephen Krasner, and David Lake in *Contention* 3, no. 3 (Spring 1994). For a discussion of the policy-currents approach, see Joseph (1981), Maxfield (1990), and the study by Fox reviewed in this essay.

2. For a discussion of these theoretical developments, see Sewell (1992) and Emirbayer and Goodwin (1994).

3. For a discussion of the difficulties and opportunities for analyzing sociopolitical change in the Mexican context, see Brachet-Márquez (1992).

has also been manifested in discussing key organized groups, which are often considered seamless organizations or simply equated with organization heads (labor czar Fidel Velázquez being the all-time favorite). A third problem has been the tendency to view actors as power holders solely by virtue of their role in the state machinery or productive process rather than as a result of their ability to deal with unanticipated situational factors and bargain with various constituencies. Conversely, organized groups have been alternately seen as powerful or weak according to how well they are connected with the structural machinery of the regime or how big an oppositional block they represent, with too little thought given to potential policy-linked conjunctural alliances with other dispersed discontents, as happened in the 1988 Mexican presidential election.

The “lost decade” of the 1980s brought a revision of such views. The capacity of state elites to weather this profound crisis and patch over the deep fissures within the regime (as exemplified in the Chiapas armed rebellion and the assassinations of Donaldo Colosio, the presidential candidate of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional, and PRI Secretary General Francisco Ruiz Massieu) has not yet been judged in retrospect as “normal.” As a result, much thought goes into deciphering actors’ strategies, tactics, and the various possible results of their actions. Such concerns tend in turn to reorient analyses toward examining the interactions among key actors in the state and society in a far more disaggregated way than in the past. This recent revision has also brought a shift away from facile structurally deterministic explanations in favor of analyzing actions, goals, value orientations, and performance within given time frameworks.

The eleven works gathered for this discussion represent a mixture of these new tendencies and some survivals from the not-so-distant past, when everything seemed preordained. This review essay will examine the extent to which these broad theoretical developments are present, and if they are not, what difference it would make if they were. Three analytical threads will be traced in these works. One is the efficacy of individual strategies in reproducing or transforming the system. Another is the effort to “unpack” large structures into their constituent actor dimensions, showing the complexity and instability over time of the compromises and alliances underlying collective action. A third is the effort to present a historical view of the problematic mixture of conflict and consensus, violence and peace that characterizes Mexican political practices.

### *Individual Strategies for Working or Beating the System*

Dorien Brunt’s *Mastering the Struggle: Gender, Actors, and Agrarian Change in a Mexican Ejido* states axiomatically that the social and symbolic orders are not static, hegemonic, or entirely imposed on individuals but are dynamic and contingent. Brunt also posits that power is not an indi-

vidual attribute but an interactive property, and consequently, even the relatively powerless can acquire some power through their ability to be “enrolled” in the projects of others. Her study investigates the forms of negotiation and maneuvering adopted by the members of an *ejido* in order to improve their lives. The book also shows the different and unequal resources that men and women in these rural communities have at their disposal for achieving their goals. For example, access to land—the most crucial resource for survival in any rural setting—must be negotiated in Mexico via local power brokers, usually lawyers or *coyotes*.<sup>4</sup> Yet women who wish to secure their land cannot pursue their claims directly but must enlist the help of local men, a requirement that weakens their chances of success considerably.

What can be expected from “work[ing] the system instead of opposing it” (p. 105)? The system—the entrenched practices that actors must deal with—has some cracks, and a few individuals can find these fissures by skillfully applying personal strategies. But in Brunt’s eagerness to emphasize the efficacy of these strategies, she fails to give sufficient analytical weight to the existence of a host of established practices backed by coercive power that combine to defeat peasants’ efforts to sustain their way of life and women’s efforts to free themselves from male dominance. For these *ejidatarios*, particularly for women in these communities, constraining structures by far outweigh enabling ones, no matter what kind of efforts are exerted.

Judith Hellman’s *Mexican Lives: Conversations on the Future of Mexico* presents a broad array of strategies for dealing with adversity. Oriented more toward the larger public or undergraduates than toward scholarly readers, this work provides ready access to life as seen from the actors’ perspective: their perception of reality, sense of understanding and control over the events that unravel around them (or more often, lack of such a sense), and the resources they draw on in order to survive. Some, like Lupe the cleaning woman or Mercedes the street vendor, merely try to avoid the worst as they are constantly buffeted by external events over which they have little control. Their survival strategies appear horrendously complex and demanding, always requiring redoubled effort and fine-tuning. Others, like Roberto the teacher, are actively involved in organized struggles to change the status quo and consider violence part of “business as usual.” The impression gathered from this cocktail of life experiences is one of extremely precarious and chaotic living arrangements, even for the relatively privileged: a healthy antidote to the picture of placidity and acquiescence that usually emanates from studies of Mexico.

Contrasting with Brunt’s and Hellman’s success in capturing indi-

4. The term *coyote* usually denotes a corrupt politician or friend of one who provides services in violation of the law.

vidual perceptions and actions in their immediate day-to-day context are Charles Davis's *Working-Class Mobilization and Political Control: Venezuela and Mexico* and Edward Williams and John Passé-Smith's *The Unionization of the Maquiladora Industry: The Tamaulipan Case in National Context*. Both these studies illustrate how information gathered through survey and elite interviews can define out of existence the historical moment, the tension between situation and action, and the difference between reality and politically correct discourse. How else could Davis have reached the improbable conclusions that patronage-based partisanship is not prevalent among formal-sector workers in Mexico, allegedly because they do not depend on the party for the delivery of personal goods and services (p. 130),<sup>5</sup> or that "corporatist interest intermediation helps little to explain why workers support hegemonic parties" (p. 153)? Similarly, how could interviews by Williams and Passé-Smith of the Tamaulipan union and business *nomenklatura* have failed to find that union bosses in Tamaulipas are strong and the PRI is weak? Strong for what, for whom, and in relation to what sequence of events? How can labor be "strong" independently of its representation in the Congreso del Trabajo (CT), and what power does the CT have independently of the PRI?

Additionally, the special historical moment in which each of these studies was carried out severely limits the authors' claims to timeless findings on the nature of labor's political stance (or lack of one). Williams and Passé-Smith's argument for the autonomous power of labor bosses in Tamaulipas is doubtful given the resounding downfall in 1989 of Tamaulipan labor leader Joaquín Hernández Galicia ("La Quina"), following his opposition to the PRI candidate in the 1988 presidential election. The Davis study was carried out at the onset of the oil boom (despite not being published until 1989), when the high standards of living enjoyed by unionized labor were unlikely to generate widespread anti-PRI feelings or special union vigilance to force the rank and file to vote for the official party in the 1979 legislative election. Given that the PRI won the 1976 presidential election by a landslide, the party's triumph was a foregone conclusion. Yet this outcome in no way justifies Davis's generalization that workers "remain politically silent because they cannot envision new alternatives to hegemonic parties and existing social pacts" (p. 164). More to the point, the study's respondents had few reasons in 1979 to envision any political alternatives.

5. As far as I know, workers in the formal sector in Mexico depend on patronage mainly for allocation of INFONAVIT housing and adequate medical treatment in the Instituto Mexicano de Seguridad Social (IMSS). They also depend on patronage for low-cost loans from the Banco Obrero, credit on furniture and household appliances, discount holidays in the Oaxtepec resort, and similar amenities. Informal workers, in contrast, are far less dependent on patronage simply because they have less to expect from the state, although this situation has changed since the creation of the Programa Nacional de Solidaridad in 1989.

*"Packing" and "Unpacking" Large Structures*

*Unions, Workers, and the State in Mexico*, edited by Kevin Middlebrook, is a prime example of the classical approach to structural change in which an interrelated set of variables is viewed as accounting for a given outcome, in this case, labor power. If one assumes that labor power is tied to the set of policies that have fostered high industrial growth under protectionist cover since the 1950s, it follows that as each of these factors suffers severe losses or are reversed in the 1980s, labor is diagnosed as a declining political actor.

Acceptance of these conventional assumptions, along with that stated by Laurence Whitehead that officially sanctioned labor is reasonably independent of the state, leads readers of this collection to the inescapable conclusion that the only remedy for loss of labor power in the 1980s is to try to reverse the trends specified. This conclusion causes Whitehead to make the rebirth of labor power contingent on consolidation of the status quo political order, which requires labor unity. Presumably, labor unity would involve continuing the pattern of rank-and-file subservience to official leadership as well as accelerating the already marked centralization of representation of labor interests. Similarly, contributor Manuel Durand acknowledges that the labor movement has been weakened during the 1980s but asserts that the fundamental equation relating it to state and regime stability remains unchanged. To offset this trend, he advocates creating a single labor federation. Thus for both Whitehead and Durand, change must be sought within the variables in the model as they were packaged decades ago. Since *Unions, Workers, and the State in Mexico* was published in 1991, the PRI has retained power, but the nature of its linkages to the executive branch and the existing labor federations are changing. This edited volume provides a snapshot of labor's situation in the mid-1980s but will inevitably suffer from rapid obsolescence.

Jonathan Fox and Susan Street both attempt to discern the complex interactions underlying the policy process in Mexico, although from contrasting perspectives. In *The Politics of Food in Mexico: State Power and Social Mobilization*, Fox meets the challenge of explaining "reforms from above" in a way that does not define societal actors out of existence or overrely on assumptions of state rationality. Moving away from the impasse in the debate over state and society, he proposes that societal and state actors coalesce around policy issues in what he calls "policy currents." This approach disaggregates the state into different agencies with distinct "embedded orientations" and historically acquired ways of "feeling" societal problems and the contradictory pressures between legitimation and accumulation.

In analyzing the case of Mexican food policy, the study first shows how Mexico's postrevolutionary history has created an ongoing concern

for political legitimacy among the rural population, a concern that stems not from state initiative alone but from the interaction among policy currents with various agendas for solving the legitimacy problem. *The Politics of Food in Mexico* then examines the Sistema Alimentaria Mexicana (SAM) as a laboratory for studying these processes. The agencies in charge of implementing SAM were divided between the “production first” policy current, which promoted the interest of private capital and public power over agriculture, and the “pro-peasant” policy current that stressed “nationalist” economic goals and the necessity of maintaining the state’s political base in rural areas. Fox traces the difficulties of reversing a long tradition of “production first” strategies in order to fulfill the food self-sufficiency goals of the program. He concludes that despite these two currents’ opposition over many aspects of the program, they “agreed” that the power of rural intermediaries (*caciques*) should be reduced (albeit for different reasons). Hence the efforts of SAM reformists were not blocked in two programs: the Programa de Apoyo a la Comercialización Ejidal (PACE) and the Compañía Nacional de Subsistencias Populares (CONASUPO), part of the COPLAMAR network.<sup>6</sup>

CONASUPO-COPLAMAR changed the incentive structure shaping the behavior of policy implementers by creating regional peasant-level organizations that operated democratically. This change was made possible by the presence of committed reformists in the agency. Anti-reformists were also part of CONASUPO, however, and some “purges” were organized to eliminate the pro-peasant elements. Subsequently, SAM and COPLAMAR were discontinued, but the rural food-store programs survived under the name of DICONSA-RURAL. Fox explains this program survival in terms of an alliance between reformist and technocratic policy currents: first, DICONSA-RURAL was an efficient way of targeting money for the poor (and thus technocrats would not object to it); second, its success had generated a powerful constituency from below (which pleased reformists); and third, the “co-responsibility” approach meshed with the discourse of the Miguel de la Madrid administration on decentralization and “democratic planning.”

In *Maestros en movimiento: Transformaciones en la burocracia estatal (1978–1982)*, Susan Street defines the policies of deconcentration and decentralization in education pursued by the Mexican state as a dynamic process of “modifying the conditions of subordination and domination”

6. COPLAMAR (the Coordinación General del Plan Nacional para Zonas Deprimidas and Grupos Marginados) was created in 1977 during the administration of José López Portillo (1976–1982) with the explicit goal of alleviating poverty among marginalized Mexicans. It functioned as a financial agency that subcontracted programs to existing agencies, in this case, to CONASUPO. The program lasted through the following de la Madrid administration. Under the subsequent administration of Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988–1994), it was rebaptized (and substantially transformed and expanded) as the Programa Nacional de Solidaridad (PRONASOL).

in which actors on both sides strove to transform organizational and institutional rules (p. 15). State policies define the arenas in which political actors are constituted as such and test their strength as contending groups. Agreeing with Peter Cleaves (1977) that policies are not implemented as a function of the consensus they generate but as a result of the social forces they mobilize, Street rejects the conception of policy as a rational-organizational project, defining it instead as a societal drama that constitutes the core of state-society interactions. In analyzing educational decentralization, Street traces the history of the organizing of school-teachers as a power group in Mexican politics. To become actors in their own right, teachers had to go beyond the narrow institutional channels restricting them to strict implementation of decisions from above. For that purpose, they created in late 1979 the Coordinadora Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación (CNTE), otherwise known as the "tendencia democrática," which was independent of the Secretaría de Educación Pública (SEP) and the state-controlled Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación (SNTE).

Street assesses educational decentralization as a confrontation between three sets of collective actors: "technocrats" pursuing a "modernization project"; "patrimonialists" (typified by the so-called Vanguardia Revolucionaria faction of the SNTE) in the dominant client-patron clique trying to maintain the status quo; and teachers from the democratic movement seeking to improve their deteriorating economic situation and establish internal union democracy and self-government. Their movement is described as a fluid process of alliances subject to constant divisions and recompositions. As a result, day-to-day struggles cannot be analyzed in relation to a preestablished scenario but should be viewed as limited disputes oriented toward specific, localized goals. Street conceives of the state itself as a complex set of contradictory practices that can be altered by its constituent actors. This is precisely the outcome that "democratic" teachers have been attempting: they are "occupying" the state apparatus in the sense of modifying bureaucratic practices and transforming them into means of opposition and resistance. Rather than "taking the state" in a Leninist sense or "colonizing" it in the corporatist sense, dissident teachers are perceived by Street as building niches of relative autonomy at the operative end of the bureaucratic hierarchy.

Ilán Bizberg's *Estado y sindicalismo en México* portrays a set of structures blocking any possibilities for transformative action from below but also reveals in one chapter the real struggles taking place at the shop level in a steel plant on the Pacific Coast. Here again, a portrayal of actors trapped in frozen monolithic structures leads to the inescapable conclusion that labor power is to be measured by the bargaining power of official leaders, which is in turn a function of the level of unionization. Ergo the labor movement in Mexico is irremediably weak (and getting

weaker), and attempts by the rank and file to transform their working and living conditions may be disregarded as marginal. In Chapter 8, however, readers discover that *Línea Proletaria*, a dissident movement that originated in the student uprising of 1968, successfully infiltrated the main steel plants in Mexico and that “natural leaders” (the shop delegates) have emerged out of this process. These delegates are now democratically elected and empowered to negotiate task structuring in the plant, an area neglected by the official union leadership.

What happened? How could a dissident and democratic movement penetrate the ranks of labor,<sup>7</sup> given the premise that official undemocratic leaders wield exclusive power? Bizberg provides four empirical explanations. First, unions occasionally voice the real grievances of the rank and file. In this case, the steelworkers’ union launched a strike action in 1978 to dissuade the government from discontinuing its long-term project of building a large steel complex in Las Truchas (p. 219). Second, workers sometimes stage work stoppages that “the spurious leadership of the union cannot deal with” (p. 223). Third, although union leaders had fired the “natural leaders” associated with *Línea Proletaria*, they were reinstated after engineering the unseating of delegates imposed from outside (proving that these delegates do more than oversee work conditions after all). Fourth, management itself can decide to deal directly with departmental delegates instead of with union section leaders (p. 233). Despite these findings, however, Bizberg concludes that these bottom-up actions cannot be construed as union actions because they constitute a “lower” kind of action centered around “conjunctural” and “particular” issues (p. 242). Hence they do not count as counterexamples to the thesis of the all-powerful (and monolithic) state imposing its will on servile union leaders.

### *The Long View*

The greatest difficulty in trying to discover reproducing and transforming practices behind “structures” is the short-term perspective usually adopted in most studies. In contrast, Raúl Trejo Delarbre’s *Crónica del sindicalismo en México (1976–1988)* and Dan La Botz’s *The Crisis of Mexican Labor* offer readers interested in the longer view detailed narratives of events that took place in different labor formations in Mexico. *Crónica del sindicalismo* synthesizes all the information recorded by the press about “what happened” in twenty-three major Mexican unions between 1976 and 1988. *The Crisis of Mexican Labor* provides a quick historical overview of the struggles of rank-and-file workers “against the bureaucrats, the bosses and the politicians” (p. xiv). These books recall Street’s in provid-

7. The same question could be asked about teachers, electricians, telephone workers, and other occupations.

ing a lively account of what life looks like from below, and they document the ways in which official unionism stifles and discredits movements seeking to establish a democratic and clean union bureaucracy in Mexico. These works also show that no matter how often dissidents are repressed, they keep reemerging and pressuring the official system into continuous transformations. In *The Crisis of Mexican Labor*, however, La Botz's lively and suggestive narrative contradicts his theoretical premises that categorize the Mexican political system as a static form of Bonapartism in which the state invariably wins. In such a context, neither the dominant classes nor labor should have a major role in effecting political change. La Botz nevertheless enjoins workers to become actively involved in changing the system.

By far the most ambitious and stimulating effort to relate structure and agency is Ruth Collier's *The Contradictory Alliance: State-Labor Relations and Regime Change in Mexico*. This study grew out of an earlier one coauthored with David Collier, *Shaping the Political Arena* (published in 1991), the source of their theoretical framework. The explanatory scheme revolves around two overarching metaphors: "critical junctures" and "incorporation of labor." The latter phrase takes on a variety of meanings, from unspecified "incorporation into the political system" (p. 4) to state introduction of "legislation regulating such things as working conditions, minimum wages and social security . . . [and] a regularized system of labor relations" (p. 10). Collier opposes incorporation to exclusion, which is defined as the violent repression of labor mobilization.

According to the Collier thesis, labor incorporation takes place during "critical junctures," when the rise of the working class and "middle sectors" in modernizing and industrializing Latin American countries spells the end of oligarchy and the emergence of regimes dominated by "reformist modernizers" bent on addressing worker militancy with legislation rather than with guns. In Mexico, according to *The Contradictory Alliance*, an era of "political reorientation" took place in the wake of the Mexican Revolution (1910–1917) that gave rise to "radical populism," which Ruth Collier understands as "an elite project to establish the political dominance of emerging urban middle sectors" over workers and peasants (later lumped together as "popular sectors") by mobilizing them as a "political support base" (p. 11).<sup>8</sup> During what she labels as the initial period of incorporation (1917 to 1940), radical populism generated a process of "progressive reform" involving substantive concessions to popu-

8. I find this scheme historically incorrect regarding Mexico, as seems to be the case whenever a comparison is attempted between Mexico and the countries of the Southern Cone. In Mexico the revolution was carried out by a highly heterogeneous coalition led by disaffected landowners, and the middle sectors did not figure prominently in it. In fact, it was too early in the twentieth century for such sectors to have emerged because Mexico was still far from modernization of any kind.

lar-sector leaders and “some degree of power sharing” (p. 12). This outcome led to friction with dominant economic sectors, which coalesced into a “counterrevolutionary or counterreform alliance.” What Collier calls “the aftermath” (the subperiod from 1940 to 1952) brought modification of the progressive alliance, leading simultaneously to reestablishment of dominant-class support and the retention of popular support, albeit “by means that were considered more coercive” (p. 35). These years also witnessed the transformation and consolidation of the hegemonic one-party system according to a centrist policy orientation whose solidity Collier attributes to its popular base. After 1952 Mexico entered a “legacy” phase in which the system built during the incorporation stage endured until the 1980s, when a new critical juncture seemed to be in the making, although it is not clearly identified as such.

It is difficult to find fault with the general idea that the relationship between the state and organized labor and peasants since the end of the revolution has been crucial in the formation and consolidation of Mexico’s one-party rule. What is more debatable is whether this relationship has followed clearly delineated stages. An initial difficulty is the notion of “critical junctures,” for which no independent defining criterion is provided other than references to periods of “labor incorporation” (see Collier and Collier 1991, 29) or “long-run alteration of the state labor coalition” (p. 104). Readers may well conclude that this concept is not an “approach” in its own right likely to provide guidance in the search for clearly definable openings or closures to fundamental sociopolitical change. Rather, the concept of “critical junctures” merely qualifies the process of labor incorporation, which has indeed been a critical factor in Mexican history. While it is difficult to disagree with the proposition that the Revolution of 1910 represented an important watershed in Mexican history, analysts know it mainly from hindsight, not as a result of any theoretical approach.

A second difficulty arises in the notion of “incorporation,” whose range of empirical referents is too wide to have much analytical usefulness. Although this notion is at some point equated with the introduction of labor legislation (p. 10), Collier refuses to apply the label of incorporation to the enacting of the first federal labor legislation in 1932. Rather, she characterizes this instead as a “conservative hiatus” during which incorporation was interrupted.<sup>9</sup> But if “radical populism” is to be understood

9. Collier’s claim that the six-year period from 1928 to 1934, known as the “Maximato” (but actually consisting of three presidential terms), was antipopulist in a broad sense is highly unconvincing, given her acknowledgement that President Emilio Portes Gil (1928–1930) was the leader of the “progressive *rojo* faction within the PNR” (p. 21). Moreover, the 1932 Ley Federal del Trabajo, however “disappointing” it may have been to some politically ambitious labor leaders, confirmed the right of the rank and file to unionize, bargain, and strike. It also forced employers to respect work contracts, something they were not accustomed to at the time and which accounted for most industrial conflicts. I also find it difficult to agree with Collier that the co-optation of the profoundly corrupt CROM leadership

as the cause of “incorporation,” readers are still left without a clear idea of which policies fell into that category or how they changed over time, especially after 1940. Ironically, the period described by Collier as turning away from radical populism and deemphasizing social reform actually witnessed the enactment of social security, the most important piece of social legislation to benefit workers (although not rural workers or peasants). Finally, it is difficult to determine where incorporation ends and the period of “legacy” begins. Collier designates 1952 as the end of incorporation and the beginning of the “legacy” phase. Yet shortly after that period, major changes took place in the relation between the state and labor, particularly a series of reversals of the *charrazos*<sup>10</sup> that had violently suppressed union independence in the 1940s. Such changes were most evident among railroad workers, whose movement threatened the very foundation of the Mexican state in the late 1950s. Labor peace was broken again in the 1970s, when radical independent unions reemerged at the urging of President Luis Echeverría, who has generally been recognized as a radical populist.

In sum, Collier’s claim of a clearly identifiable period during which the relation between labor and the Mexican state was defined, followed by the consolidation of regime characteristics lasting into the 1980s, does not stand up to close scrutiny. Instead of clear landmarks on which to overlay a precise periodization, what Mexican history demonstrates is a see-saw process of actions and reactions between labor and state actors—some engineered from above, others initiated from below—followed by concessions and repression and accompanied by various transformations of the labor sector and its relation with the state. In this alternative reading of the historical record, the Mexican popular alliance is not a legacy from the distant past but a highly dynamic process that is continuously being threatened and re-created. Far from relying only on workers, this alliance has involved complex interactions between the three incorporated sectors—labor, peasants, and the popular sector. Collier’s lack of discussion of the ups and downs of the relation between the Mexican state and the peasantry or that between the state and the highly heterogeneous and volatile “popular sector” further weakens the path-dependent approach proposed in *The Contradictory Alliance*.

### *Conclusion*

Although the changes experienced in Mexican society in the past

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under Plutarco Elías Calles (1924–1928) and the exclusion of other more radical unions can be regarded as “radical populism” that is comparable in any way to the policies followed by Lázaro Cárdenas (1934–1940) with respect to workers and peasants.

10. *Charrazos* are union elections rigged to select leaders who will respond directly to the state rather than to their constituents.

decade have not been fully translated into self-conscious theoretical or methodological shifts, the works reviewed here indicate the slow travail of wider paradigm shifts in the social sciences, particularly the shift away from dichotomizing state and society or structure and action. After the heavy production in the 1980s of collected essays providing snapshots of changes in virtually every aspect of life in Mexico, a new generation of analyses is now tackling the problem of redefining contemporary Mexican reality with less dependence on set structural and timeless reference points or blind belief in the dominance of the state over society. As a result, current analyses are revealing a renewed emphasis on actors (collective or individual) and their institutionally and culturally embedded perception of their own situations. Such works also demonstrate the authors' capacity to innovate and reconfigure existing patterns of interactions and practices.

Despite these signs of new hope, scholars still have a long way to go. Among the books reviewed and in the literature on Mexico in general, we still find numerous examples of "truths" asserted by authorial fiat with little or no reference to sources or to contrasting views on subjects amenable to empirical study. In labor studies, for example, two camps have formed. One asks the reader to accept a priori that official labor leaders are illegitimate, unresponsive to rank-and-file demands, and irretrievably corrupt. The other camp demands the opposite, that we should believe that official labor leaders are reasonably independent of the state (which presumably means that sometimes they are and sometimes they are not) and reasonably responsive to their constituents. Social movements like the 1968 student uprising are either discounted as simple failures or pronounced "watersheds" in Mexican history. As a reader, I see no reason why anyone should be believed on faith. Readers need to be convinced with data and over time. The majority of the books reviewed here address this concern at least partially and thus break new ground in the study of Mexico.

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