



Vol. 7, No. 1, Fall 2009, 353-360

www.ncsu.edu/project/acontracorriente

Review/Reseña

Tanalís Padilla, *Rural Resistance in the Land of Zapata: The Jaramillista Movement and the Myth of the Pax Priísta, 1940-1962*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2008.

Resistance and Legitimacy during the Mexican Miracle

Samuel Brunk

University of Texas—El Paso

Rural Resistance in the Land of Zapata is a welcome addition to the underdeveloped historiography of mid-twentieth century Mexico. In giving the Jaramillista movement the comprehensive coverage it merits, Tanalís Padilla demonstrates how its ideology evolved over time and how, employing an eclectic mix of resistance tactics, Jaramillismo gradually became a threat to the single party state. The Jaramillistas, she contends, were a crucial bridge between the revolution (Zapatismo in particular) and later peasant and guerrilla movements. She adds that a close look at their struggle reveals that the hegemony of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) was far less complete in the years of the Mexican

Miracle (1940-1968) than scholars have often supposed. Though sometimes associated with the notion of a “Pax Priísta,” according to Padilla this period actually witnessed a “steady progression of social unrest” (7).

The volume is divided into seven chapters. The first, entitled “The Ghost of Zapata,” reviews the history of communal resistance to land loss in the state of Morelos and the history of Zapatismo in particular. Padilla notes the importance of popular liberalism in the nineteenth century and the almost sacred quality of Emiliano Zapata’s Plan of Ayala, a quality that became infused into Article 27 of the Constitution of 1917, which provided for land reform. Chapter 1 also examines Rubén Jaramillo’s background, including his participation in Zapatismo as a young man, the religious training as a Methodist pastor that helped make him a charismatic speaker, and his autobiography. Moving farther into the history of the movement (and arguably getting ahead of herself, since many of these points are repeated later in the book), the author describes how Jaramillo and his followers were gradually radicalized by Marxist thought. She also remarks on the great importance of the leader to the movement, which would make it difficult for the Jaramillistas to regroup after Jaramillo was killed. Finally, this chapter discusses how industrialization and tourism changed Morelos dramatically, especially after 1940, making Jaramillismo more diverse in social composition than Zapatismo had been. Based on this analysis, Padilla concludes that though the Jaramillistas resembled the Zapatistas “at first glance,” they were not mere remnants of the earlier movement. Rather, they changed with the times, consistently seeking inclusion in a modernizing Mexico.

Chapter 2, “Jaramillo, Cárdenas, and the Emiliano Zapata Cooperative,” explores the birth of a cooperative sugar refinery at Zacatepec, Morelos during the presidency of Lázaro Cárdenas (1934-1940). It was the early history of this refinery that produced the Jaramillista movement, and for Padilla it serves as a valuable case study of the intersection of popular politics, national economic policies, and administrative corruption. The cooperative opened with the promise of bringing greater prosperity to the countryside, and the *campesinos* who were to supply it with cane chose Jaramillo as president of the council

charged with managing its affairs. Unfortunately, Padilla demonstrates, the new mill offered poor prices for the cane it refined, thus reproducing the exploitation previously present in the Morelian countryside. To address the conflict that developed over that and other issues, Cárdenas situated the federal government as the final arbiter at Zacatepec, and after he left the presidency, national administrations repeatedly intervened on the side of management, which wrested power away from members of the cooperative through bribery and repression. Under the administration of Manuel Avila Camacho (1940-46) the government took control of water, pricing, loans, and crops, and these arrangements, justified as wartime measures, lasted into the 1970s. Jaramillo, who had initially embraced the mill as a modern development that might help the rural population more than the land reform Zapata had advocated, now found himself in opposition to it. He gradually came to understand the need to link the struggles of campesinos and mill workers, and in 1942 they joined forces for a strike at Zacatepec. Despite the negative turn of Cárdenas's Zacatepec experiment, Padilla demonstrates, Cardenismo became another crucial point of orientation for the Jaramillistas, representing the notion that state power *could* be used in ways that benefited campesinos.

Chapter 3, "The Agrarista Tradition," examines Jaramillo's use of arms to press his agenda. He first resorted to arms in 1943 due to repression in the aftermath of the Zacatepec strike, framing his rebellion as a rebirth of the Zapatista struggle. Padilla reiterates, however, that this was hardly a carbon copy of the earlier movement: many of those who joined Jaramillo in rebellion did so, for instance, to avoid the draft instituted during WWII. Moreover, it was at this time that Jaramillo produced his Plan of Cerro Prieto, which was the "first expression of a radicalization that would reemerge in decades to come" (87). The plan emphasized industrial development that would support the livelihood of those living on the land, and called for a six-hour work day, schools that imparted practical knowledge, and child care centers. Padilla concludes that it had an "anarcho-syndicalist" tone, with elements that would forward an alliance with labor, but was "an otherwise rustic document with a genuine campesino feel" (98). She adds that its broad vision belied the conventional

argument that peasant movements merely “present narrow solutions to local demands” (101). Despite the Jaramillistas’ ideological flexibility and various tactical considerations, they ultimately refused an alliance with the right-wing Sinarquista movement that was powerful in this period. While the author does not offer a count of Jaramillistas in arms, she indicates that there were armed groups numbering from 25-150 in various municipalities. She also argues that they enjoyed broad support from the villagers around them, proof lying in the effectiveness with which they could hide.

The Jaramillistas were eventually granted amnesty, and they laid down their weapons to get into politics. Chapter 4, “Like Juárez, with Our Offices on the Run,” examines the electoral option, exercised in both 1946 and 1952. In 1946 the Jaramillistas created their own party, the Partido Agrario-Obrero Morelense (PAOM) and ran Jaramillo himself for governor of the state. The PAOM’s platform was reformist, pinning its hopes for change on the exercise of a strong interventionist state that would complete Cardenista reforms and address pervasive poverty. A marked shift from the demands for structural change made in the Plan of Cerro Prieto, this platform reflected Cardenista-style populism rather than socialism and attracted substantial support from teachers and workers. Despite this effort to work within the system, the 1946 campaign encountered, first, electoral fraud—confirmation, claims Padilla, that Jaramillo posed a serious threat—and, after the elections were allowed to proceed in a show of democracy, considerable repression to demonstrate that boundaries had been crossed. This repression drove the Jaramillistas underground from 1946-1951 and further radicalized the movement. Jaramillo again ran for governor in 1952, while his party supported the relatively strong opposition campaign for president of General Miguel Henríquez Guzmán, who had split from the PRI and was Cardenista in orientation. Jaramillo’s platform was to the left of that of Henríquez, but the Jaramillistas gained broader exposure from their association with the national campaign. One rally at Jojutla was attended by 20,000 people, a measure of considerable support. Unfortunately, the end result was again fraud and repression, including a wave of assassinations, and Jaramillo returned to arms while the Henriquistas made a deal with the PRI.

In chapter 5, "They Made Him into a Rebel," Padilla discusses the new period of revolt, which began with the release of an updated version of the Plan of Cerro Prieto that called for a new revolution. From 1946-1951 the strategy had been one of "armed hiding," providing clandestine support for another Zacatepec strike and other mobilizations, but without engaging government forces. Now the idea was to provoke a general uprising. In pursuit of that goal, the Jaramillistas began to take justice into their own hands, upon occasion, against hired gunmen and police chiefs. In Padilla's estimation this represented a move away from the vision and tactics of both Zapata and Cárdenas, toward activities more representative of the guerrillas that would form in the 1960s and 1970s. The Jaramillistas were met with counterinsurgency measures such as torture that point toward the later period as well. There was also an endeavor to delegitimize Jaramillo, who government propaganda described as a bandit, but Padilla argues that he enjoyed a "tremendous amount of legitimacy" in Morelos (150). That legitimacy was based in part on his link to Zapata, but the Jaramillista position was now socialist, seeking drastic changes in the class structure that Zapata did not.

Chapter 6, "Gender, Community, and Struggle," focuses attention on how the movement's avowed goal of political equality for women coexisted with traditional rural constraints on women's actions. In general, Padilla finds that the Jaramillistas sought to alleviate the strains placed on women by poverty, not to revolutionize gender relations. Jaramillo himself tended to express admiration of women when he perceived in them characteristics that were typically "male." Though women were largely excluded from leadership roles in the movement, this was not true of Jaramillo's second wife, Epifania Zúñiga, who became a figure of some controversy due to the influence she was rumored to have with her husband. Even Zúñiga's initiatives, however, tended to focus on such things as the creation of sewing cooperatives, which reinforced traditional roles. Still, Padilla argues, the role of women in the movement was fundamental (she generalizes, rather romantically, that their commitment was "unbreakable" once they got involved), and ultimately their presence challenged the restrictions placed upon them. Women served as

bodyguards for Jaramillo, for example, partly because they met with less repression in that position than did men. In seeking a balance on the role of women in the movement, Padilla concludes that the mere existence of a feminine sector in Jaramillismo was “remarkable,” but this hardly seems to be the case given what we now know about women’s organizing from works such as Jocelyn Olcott’s *Revolutionary Women in Postrevolutionary Mexico*.

The final chapter, “Judas’s Embrace,” examines Jaramillo’s assassination. Adolfo López Mateos came to the presidency in 1958 spouting agrarian rhetoric and proffering a pardon for Jaramillo. Emerging again into public life, Jaramillo embarked on a new project, the establishment of a colony of six thousand campesinos in vacant lands in western Morelos. When this initiative became mired in the bureaucratic doldrums of the land reform process, the Jaramillistas responded with land invasions in both 1961 and 1962. These steps were inspired in part, Padilla argues, by a new framework for action, the Cuban Revolution, which would also, of course, play a critical role in inspiring guerrillas to come. The Jaramillistas now sought to develop a cell-based structure to enhance mobilization and reduce dependence on their leader; they also looked to transform their largely agrarian movement into a broader based, nationalist struggle. Meanwhile, the Cuban event was weighing heavily on government officials. Jaramillo was now visualized as a dangerous communist agitator (he had, in fact, joined the Communist Party), and thus posed a threat the government could not overlook. While Padilla is unable to say who ordered the brutal assassination of Jaramillo, Zúñiga and three of Zúñiga’s children that ensued, she notes that an earlier, failed attempt to arrest Jaramillo had been reported directly to the president’s staff and that it was federal army forces that carried the murders out.

This nuanced and well-written book makes contributions on many levels. Naturally, it adds much to our understanding of Jaramillismo. At the base of its contribution in that regard is the oral history project (consisting of, by my count, twenty-seven interviews) in which the author engaged mostly in 1999 and 2000. These interviews complement two other “generations” of oral histories, done in the late 1970s and in the 1980s, to

help Padilla achieve her admirable goal of putting the words of the Jaramillistas at the center of her story. There might have been an opportunity here for a direct analysis of the differences between these three generations of interviews. Tantalizingly, she remarks that the 1999-2000 informants were “far more explicit about the indigenous component of their movement” (18) in the wake of the Chiapas rebellion than earlier interviewees had been, but she does not explore the possibilities that a reconceptualization of identity might have taken place, or that they were simply exaggerating that indigenous component under the new circumstances. Given the excellent results of her decision to tell her story in a fairly straightforward fashion, however, and to focus on the movement itself rather than on memory, this is more a passing observation than a point of criticism.

Factors such as electoral fraud make it difficult for Padilla to quantify the support that Jaramillo enjoyed, but her case that the movement had broad backing in Morelos is convincing. Beyond the intractable question of specific numbers, though, lies the issue of what *kind* of support Jaramillo enjoyed. People were apparently willing to vote for him, but when he sought to encourage Morelenses to take up arms (most notably after 1952) he got only a meager response, and Padilla does not fully explain why. Here the role of Zapata may be significant. Padilla argues that Jaramillo drew “moral legitimacy” (5) from Zapata’s memory, while contending that the government relied on physical force. My sense is that the story is more complicated than this, that Mexican officials were still able to draw a measure of legitimacy from the Zapata they had constructed as a founding father, and that this helps explain why people could vote against the PRI but could not or would not mount a broad-based rebellion. “We are fighting,” said one Jaramillista, “for the principles from which our rulers claim legitimacy but which they have completely betrayed. It is they who are operating against the law” (160). It was an impressive position, but perhaps not one that many could confidently second, and Padilla’s contention that Zapata remained throughout the century “a hero squarely in the hands of the people” (212) misses the complexity of the history of Zapata’s myth (and of the state’s legitimacy) in twentieth century Mexico.

The author is nevertheless correct in insisting that the use of physical force against dissident movements was an important ingredient of the governing system at mid-century. This is not an entirely new insight, of course, but she brings critical evidence to bear on the issue by letting us see the brutality through the eyes of her Jaramillista informants. The Mexican Miracle looks far less miraculous when not viewed from the top down, which, as Padilla indicates, has been the predominant scholarly approach to the period. Other historians will hopefully take her lead by developing studies rooted in the local and regional events of the era, and thus help us better appreciate the relative roles of persuasion and coercion in the mix of PRI power. Her suggestion that scholarly attention be turned toward the repressive apparatus of the Mexican state is also an excellent one.

Finally, Padilla's work makes a major contribution in its careful depiction of how the Jaramillista movement changed over time, differentiating itself from Zapatismo and become increasingly similar to the guerrillas that would emerge in the 1960s and 1970s. At times she oversimplifies Zapatismo to draw a strong contrast between it and Jaramillismo: the Zapatistas also had a non-peasant component, small though it may have been; schoolteachers also played an important role in Zapatismo; Zapatista rhetoric was also consistently national in orientation; and many Zapatista positions also grew more "radical" over time (the development of the program did not end with the Plan of Ayala). Still, the argument that Jaramillismo became a different, more heterodox kind of peasant movement as time passed is irrefutable. Padilla's recognition both of the flaws in the single party system and the prolonged resistance to it helps complicate any neat division between an orderly period of industrial growth and relative social peace from 1940-1968, and one of prolonged crisis that followed. This book should be required reading for scholars wishing to think more deeply about such issues.