



Vol. 5, No. 2, Winter 2008, 196-219

www.ncsu.edu/project/accontracorriente

Where Have All the Marxists Gone? Marxism and the Historiography of the Mexican Revolution

Luis F. Ruiz

University of Oregon

Scholars from numerous academic fields have tried to make sense of the Mexican Revolution, a movement which began as a unified multi-class rebellion against the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz, but ended as a series of regional battles where factions with contrasting agendas fought each other in a struggle for land, power, and autonomy. The complex sequence of events that occurred in Mexico between 1910 and 1920 has inspired (and continues to inspire) historians to propose different interpretations of the revolutionary process. This article will discuss how the interpretations of various Marxist historians shaped the historiography of the Mexican Revolution. Interpretive models developed by two generations of Marxists—those from the 1930s and their counterparts from the 1970s—influenced the way scholars perceived Mexican history in general and the Mexican Revolution in particular. Marxist historians broadly defined the Mexican Revolution as (a) an aborted or unfulfilled proletarian revolution, and (b) the victory of the middle class bourgeoisie and the development of capitalism.

The Marxist contribution, however, was belittled and marginalized after 1980 by a number of preeminent Mexicanist historians.¹ Traditionalists questioned the merits of the Marxist synthesis, while revisionists claimed that all syntheses, including the Marxist one, failed to explain the apparent incongruities of the Mexican Revolution. In the past twenty-five years, an increasing number of historians have chosen to interpret the Mexican Revolution as encompassing “many revolutions” occurring simultaneously in the various regions of the country. Recent studies have focused on particular aspects of the Revolution such as individuals, factions, industries, class, race, gender, and geographic areas.² The revisionist move towards regional history caused all-encompassing Marxist interpretations to become obsolete.³ The aim of this article therefore is to reevaluate the place of Marxist historians within the historiography of the Mexican Revolution. Are Marxist interpretations truly obsolete? How can they continue to inform the history of the Mexican Revolution?

Mexicanists like Alan Knight and David Bailey criticized Marxism for mechanically reducing the Revolution to a simple story of economics and class struggle.⁴ But Marxist interpretations should not be defined

¹ Categorizing historians is certainly an inexact, perhaps even unfair, science, but for the purpose of discussing historiographical debates I have chosen to divide Mexicanist scholars into three general groups: revisionists, traditionalists, and Marxists. By traditionalists I refer to historians who adhere to Frank Tannenbaum’s “orthodox” interpretation of the Revolution as presented in his seminal works *Peace by Revolution* (1933) and *The Mexican Agrarian Revolution* (1929). Tannenbaum introduced the idea of looking at the Revolution as a broad, popular-agrarian movement. Revisionists, on the other hand, abandoned the traditional orthodox view of the Revolution, and instead focused on regional studies. Some of the most prominent revisionists, or “regionalists,” include Romana Falcón, Mark Wasserman, and Gilbert Joseph.

² See Mark Wasserman, “The Mexican Revolution: Region and Theory, Signifying Nothing?” *Latin American Research Review*, 25, 1 (1990): 231-242.

³ The few historians who did write all-encompassing works of synthesis in the last twenty five years—especially Alan Knight, John Mason Hart, and Michael J. Gonzales—also rejected Marxism as a guiding theoretical model. See Alan Knight, *The Mexican Revolution*, 2 vols. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986); John Mason Hart, *Revolutionary Mexico: The Coming and Process of the Mexican Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987); Michael J. Gonzales, *The Mexican Revolution, 1910-1940* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2002).

⁴ I place Alan Knight and David Bailey in the traditionalist group because they agree that the orthodoxy is still the most reliable interpretation found in the historiography. Knight explained that “the traditional, ‘Tannenbaumian’ image of a

exclusively as the systematic application of ideology to history. The various arguments made by two generations of Marxists creatively mediated between a rigid ideology and the chaotic, seemingly incoherent, events that took place from 1910 to 1920. While Marxist historians did not provide solutions to all of the historiographic problems, their interpretations have compelled other historians to rethink the importance of radical movements, class relations, and socio-political and economic changes that occurred during, and shaped the history of, the Mexican Revolution. Furthermore, the Marxists developed several conceptual models that future historians could use as platforms upon which to build alternative interpretations and narratives of the Mexican Revolution.

Who were these Marxists? All of the individuals who will be discussed were historians, intellectuals, or scholars who used Marxist methodology to interpret history. Although many of them were involved in political activities, I will focus on their work as historians, and not as a politicians, agitators, or party members.⁵ The first generation of Marxist historians emerged in the 1930s, and its most important members included the Mexicans Rafael Ramos Pedrueza and Alfonso Teja Zabre. The 1930s Marxists gained prominence under the leftist regime of Lázaro Cárdenas (1934-1940). They admired the Russian Revolution and they were among the first to bring Marxism into Mexico's intellectual circles.⁶ When Cárdenas's term ended, however, Mexico entered a more conservative period between 1940 and 1968. At this time, Marxism began to lose favor among Mexican politicians and intellectuals. Eventually, two influential events—the Cuban Revolution and the 1968 Massacre in

popular, agrarian revolution remains to a large degree valid." See Alan Knight, "Revisionism and Revolution: Mexico Compared to England and France," *Past and Present*, 134 (1992): 175.

⁵ The Marxists who participated in politics include: Rafael Ramos Pedrueza, Adolfo Gilly, and Enrique Semo. In the 1920s Ramos Pedrueza was a federal deputy for the Liberal Constitutional Party under Alvaro Obregón's administration and later Mexico's ambassador to Ecuador. In the 1960s Gilly participated in a few revolutionary movements (which in part led to his imprisonment in the Lecumberri prison), and in the 1990s he was an advisor to Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas when he was mayor of Mexico City. Finally, Semo held the position of Minister of Culture in Mexico City under the administration of Andrés Manuel López Obrador (2000-2005).

⁶ Harry Bernstein, "Marxismo en México, 1917-1925," *Historia Mexicana*, 7, 4 (1958): 501.

Tlatelolco—renewed interest in Marxism and gave rise to a second generation of Marxist historians. These scholars revised the previous Marxist interpretations by posing a new set of questions about the Revolution. For example, the 1970s Marxists began to define the Porfiriato, the thirty-five year dictatorship that preceded the Revolution, as the consolidation of bourgeois capitalism, and not as a period of semi-feudalism (as suggested previously by the 1930s generation). The 1970s group included the Mexicans Arnaldo Córdova and Enrique Semo, the Argentine Adolfo Gilly, the Americans James Cockcroft, Donald Hodges and Ross Gandy, and the Mexican-American Ramón Eduardo Ruiz.

The aforementioned individuals were not the only Marxists who commented on the Mexican Revolution. Other Marxists, including prominent figures like José Carlos Mariátegui, Leon Trotsky, and Vicente Lombardo Toledano, contributed to the historiography by writing in journals, newspapers, and pamphlets. However, this study will focus primarily on the work of scholars who developed a more comprehensive and detailed analysis of the Revolution. The Marxist models that will be discussed were derived specifically from monographs about the Mexican Revolution. The interpretations of the different Marxist historians may be grouped into six models. The 1930s models included (1) Ramos Pedrueza's theory of bourgeois democratic revolution and (2) Teja Zabre's idea of Humanist Marxism. The 1970s models included (3) Ruiz and Cockcroft's theory of non-revolution, (4) Córdova, Hodges, and Gandy's Bonapartist model, (5) Semo's cycle of bourgeois revolutions, and (6) Gilly's interrupted revolution.

Of the two generations, the 1930s Marxists have been the more thoroughly discredited. In a well-known historiographical essay, David Bailey said that the 1930s generation “had little to recommend it to serious scholars. Professionals recorded this [the Marxists' work] as evidence of reactionary thinking or puerile radicalism but ignored it as history.”⁷ Scholars criticized the 1930s Marxists for two main reasons: they manipulated facts to fit a rigid ideology and they upheld repetitive or unoriginal conclusions. Even members of the 1970s generation suggested

⁷ David Bailey, “Revisionism and the Recent Historiography of the Mexican Revolution,” *Hispanic American Historical Review*, 58, 1 (1978): 68

that the 1930s Marxist models were basically homogenous.⁸ For example, Donald Hodges and Ross Gandy reviewed the existing Marxist interpretations, but in their assessment of the 1930s Marxists, they did not mention any of the individuals by name. Also, Hodges and Gandy limited their comments on the 1930s models to a summary provided by a third scholar, Pablo González Casanova. A comparative analysis of two 1930s Marxist models, developed respectively by Rafael Ramos Pedrueza and Alfonso Teja Zabre, will demonstrate that the 1930s generation produced works that differed in crucial ways, and that they were not at all homogenized, as Hodges and Gandy would have us believe. Teja Zabre and Ramos Pedrueza agreed on several points, but they had different ideas regarding the outcome of the Mexican Revolution and the application of Marxist methodology.

Rafael Ramos Pedrueza developed the first influential Marxist interpretation in *La lucha de clases a través de la historia de México*, a work published in two volumes (1934-1941).⁹ His theory of a bourgeois democratic revolution stated that Mexico's petite bourgeoisie, with the aid of peasants and workers, engaged in class warfare against the elite landholders. Ramos Pedrueza suggested that petite bourgeois leaders such as Alvaro Obregón and Plutarco Elías Calles gained power "by defeating feudalism and [international bourgeois] imperialism, two elements of the Porfirian dictatorship."¹⁰ The triumph of the petite bourgeoisie ignited Mexico's transition from semi-feudalism to capitalism, and from dictatorship to democracy. He insisted, however, that workers and peasants failed to stage a unified proletarian revolution because they lacked an advanced class consciousness. Emiliano Zapata's Plan de Ayala, for example, illustrated the disconnection between the peasant rebels of Morelos and the industrial workers of the cities.¹¹ Zapata's proposal called

⁸ Donald Hodges and Ross Gandy, *Mexico 1910-1982, Reform or Revolution?* (London: Zed Press, 1979), 89-92.

⁹ Part of this section on Rafael Ramos Pedrueza is taken from my Master's Thesis. See Luis F. Ruiz, "History, Marxism, and Cultural Hegemony in Postrevolutionary Mexico: The Forgotten Case of Rafael Ramos Pedrueza" (M.A. Thesis, University of Oregon, 2007).

¹⁰ Rafael Ramos Pedrueza, *La lucha de clases a través de la historia de México: Ensayo marxista* (México, DF: Talleres Gráficos de la Nación, 1936), 37.

¹¹ Rafael Ramos Pedrueza, *La lucha de clases a través de la historia de*

for reforms that exclusively affected the peasantry. As a result, other sectors of the proletariat were not incorporated into the Zapatista movement despite sharing common enemies such as the exploitative hacendados and factory owners. Ramos Pedrueza concluded that the distance between peasants and workers would have to be eliminated before a socialist revolution could take place.

Of all the Marxist historians, Ramos Pedrueza was the one who adhered most firmly to Marxist ideology. For example, he interpreted the transformation of Mexico into a bourgeois democracy as the “third stage” of class struggle, a historical process which could only end with the downfall of capitalism and the rise of socialism.¹² The stages of class struggle referred to a Marxist teleology where class relations evolved as a result of economic changes. Ramos Pedrueza complied with classic Marxism when he said that changes in the superstructure (religion, art, philosophy, law) could not disrupt the social hierarchy because those changes did not affect the base—the economic relations defined by ownership of the means of production.¹³ In Ramos Pedrueza’s model, the Mexican Revolution represented a move toward a new stage of class struggle because the petite bourgeoisie took control of the means of production from the defeated Porfirian elite. The subsequent implementation of capitalism and bourgeois democracy, according to the Marxist teleology, would eventually, and necessarily, lead to the rise of a true proletarian and socialist revolution. If such a revolution occurred in Mexico, Ramos Pedrueza believed that it would be part of a global movement. “The Revolution that is occurring in Mexico is tied inexorably to the future of the world. No one can be isolated from the international concert.”¹⁴

México: Revolución democraticoburguesa (México, DF: Talleres Gráficos de la Nación, 1941), 67.

¹² The first stage was the Independence War (1810-1821) and the second was the Reforma (approximately 1857-1876), a period of liberal and anticlerical reforms led by Benito Juárez. Ramos Pedrueza argued that the third stage, the Revolution, emerged after the Porfirian government chose to deviate from the ideals of the Reforma. See Ramos Pedrueza, *La lucha de clases a través de la historia de México: Revolución democraticoburguesa*, 21.

¹³ Ramos Pedrueza, *La lucha de clases a través de la historia de México: Ensayo marxista*, 19.

¹⁴ Ramos Pedrueza, *La lucha de clases a través de la historia de México: Revolución democraticoburguesa*, 467.

Although Ramos Pedrueza criticized the Mexican Revolution for its shortcomings, such as the lack of class consciousness among the masses, he also pointed out the Revolution's positive accomplishments and its great potential for the future. In his theory of the bourgeois democratic revolution, Ramos Pedrueza depicted Lázaro Cárdenas's regime as the fulfillment of the Revolution's promise. He believed that Cárdenas could lead Mexico to the next stage of class struggle.¹⁵ For example, he praised the education and social reforms implemented by Cárdenas, and suggested that these reforms could play an instrumental role in the next phase of the revolution. The land distribution reform would be the first step towards achieving economic independence for the masses, while the education reforms would start the process of indoctrination. Ramos Pedrueza said that the teachers of the new educational programs would be responsible for developing class consciousness among the peasants and workers. "It is the essential and splendid duty of the intellectuals, especially the revolutionary teachers, to disseminate the socialist revolutionary doctrine...and to achieve the unification of the peasant masses."¹⁶ Ramos Pedrueza's model therefore suggested that the Mexican Revolution, besides giving rise to a bourgeois democracy, also created the conditions for the future arrival of socialism.

Alfonso Teja Zabre agreed with several points of the bourgeois democratic revolution theory, but his conceptual approach differed from Ramos Pedrueza's. The two Marxists concurred on three important conclusions: (1) the Mexican Revolution was started by the petite bourgeoisie, (2) the masses aided the petite bourgeois leaders in their pursuit of socio-economic changes, such as the destruction of semi-feudalism, and (3) the Revolution emerged as a reaction to the Porfiriato, an era in which Mexico regressed "to the times when the Catholic Church and the wealthy families controlled the large haciendas, the money, credit, and rent."¹⁷ While Ramos Pedrueza saw the Revolution as another stage in the history of class struggle, Teja Zabre argued that the Porfiriato created

¹⁵ Ibid., 440.

¹⁶ Ibid., 441.

¹⁷ Alfonso Teja Zabre, *Panorama histórico de la revolución mexicana* (México DF: Ediciones Botas, 1939), 81.

unprecedented and unique conditions for Mexico's exploited classes. He said that the masses participated in the Revolution because, during the Porfiriato, the plan for progress and industrialization excluded the "indigenous population, the workers, and the humble classes. Their salaries, their rations of maize and food, and the overall quality of life declined."¹⁸ Teja Zabre focused on the plight of marginalized groups, which is why his conceptual model can be called "humanist Marxism." The use of Marxism to study the exploited people of Mexico might cause the theory "to lose its dramatic character and solidity, but it will instead gain a sense of humanity."¹⁹ According to the humanist Marxism model, the Mexican Revolution was more than just a petite bourgeois revolution; it was also an agrarian, peasant, indianist, and nationalist revolution whose victory was ensured by the efforts of a diverse and rebellious population.

Teja Zabre applied Marxist methodology with less rigidity than did Ramos Pedrueza. Teja Zabre's model employed the most useful elements of Marxism, while eschewing the more inflexible parts of traditional Marxist doctrine. For example, unlike Ramos Pedrueza, indeed, unlike most of the Marxists from either generation, Teja Zabre refused to accept teleological conclusions. The humanist Marxism model did not suggest that the Mexican Revolution will necessarily lead to socialism. Teja Zabre stood out among his fellow Marxists because he "denied the existence of a natural law that guides the process of history. On the contrary, he believed only in the possibility of constructing hypotheses that lead to a series of partial indications and conclusions, which are susceptible to subsequent changes and modifications."²⁰ Another significant difference between Teja Zabre and Ramos Pedrueza was that the former did not draw connections between Mexico's working classes and the international proletariat movement. Instead of trying to anticipate the future stages of the Revolution, Teja Zabre simply tried to make sense of what happened in the past. His model succeeded because it managed to incorporate the concept

¹⁸ Ibid., 82.

¹⁹ Andrea Sánchez Quintanar, "El pensamiento histórico de Alfonso Teja Zabre," *Anuario de historia*, 6 (1966): 82.

²⁰ Alberto del Castillo Troncoso, "Alfonso Teja Zabre y Rafael Ramos Pedrueza: Dos interpretaciones marxistas en la década de los treinta," *Iztapalapa*, 22, 51 (2001): 230.

of class struggle “and apply it not as a closed and dogmatic theory, but as an instrument of analysis and scholarship.”²¹ In his analysis of economic relations and popular uprisings, for example, the idea of class struggle allowed Teja Zabre to explain why certain people participated in the violent insurrections against the landowners.

Besides employing a flexible interpretation of Marxism, Teja Zabre also suggested that various methodologies should be considered in order to reach a more balanced “panoramic” view of the Mexican Revolution. He insisted that Marxism was still the best method because historians can use it “to select and organize the facts and to identify the causality related to, above all, the economic and social factors.”²² Nonetheless, Teja Zabre observed that social and economic factors did not define the whole of history. Those factors should be studied carefully in the case of the Mexican Revolution because they had been previously overlooked. To achieve a panorama of the Revolution, however, Teja Zabre recommended that several interpretations be part of the discussion. “The idealist, orthodox, romantic, economic and materialist conceptions should be completed with the known facts and data.”²³ The humanist Marxism model endorsed several methods to study the Mexican Revolution, but as Teja Zabre concluded, the most important element was the condition of the exploited classes and how marginalized groups reacted to, or participated in, revolutionary movements.

After 1940, Mexican scholars and politicians gradually lost interest in Marxism, both as a political ideology and an academic methodology. Between 1940 and 1968, Mexico’s political climate (and the successive administrations) became increasingly conservative, while Mexicanist scholars began to develop more traditionalist (and official) interpretations of the Revolution.²⁴ By the late 1960s, however, a pair of crucial events

²¹ Sánchez Quintanar, “El pensamiento histórico de Alfonso Teja Zabre,” 79.

²² Teja Zabre, *Panorama histórico de la revolución mexicana*, 5.

²³ *Ibid.*, 178.

²⁴ In the 1940s and 1950s the Priista government became more involved in the production and public representation of history. Hence, certain history textbooks, such as Alberto Morales Jiménez’s *Historia de la Revolución Mexicana* (1951) developed an official interpretation of the Mexican Revolution which depicted the revolution as heroic, unifying, democratic, and nationalist.

influenced the resurgence of Marxism: The Cuban Revolution and the Tlatelolco Massacre. In the 1960s and 1970s, Marxism played a role in several socio-political and cultural movements that emerged, not just in Mexico, but throughout Latin America. Eric Zolov calls these movements “the New Left” in his article in this issue.²⁵ The Marxist historians were certainly influenced by New Left currents, but they did not belong collectively to an established group or school of thought. The contribution of “Neo-Marxist” historians lied in publications and scholarship, and throughout the 1970s they published so many works on the Mexican Revolution that they actually managed to dominate the field. David Bailey recognized that at the time, “Marxist historians of the Revolution gained a respectability in the 1960s and early 1970s that they lacked before.”²⁶

The Marxist models of the 1970s opposed several of the positions taken earlier by their predecessors of the 1930s. For example, they no longer praised the “potential” of the Revolution. Whereas Ramos Pedrueza believed that Lázaro Cárdenas’s land reforms and educational programs could take Mexico toward the next stage of socialism, the 1970s Marxists saw Cárdenas’s presidency as little more than part of an ongoing elite effort to exercise hegemonic control over society. Since Mexico’s conservative government claimed to represent the Mexican Revolution in its institutionalized form, the “New Left” Marxists developed a more pessimistic view of both the Revolution and the postrevolutionary state. They also developed more complex and detailed arguments than those advanced by earlier Marxists. Because of this, the interpretive models discussed below are presented as mere distillations of longer works. The purpose of discussing these models is to note the variety of interpretations and to trace the evolution of Marxist thought among Mexicanist historians.

Two members of the 1970s group, Ramón Eduardo Ruiz and James Cockcroft, proposed a theory of “non-revolution” which countered several of the arguments made by the 1930s generation. Ruiz and Cockcroft claimed that the Mexican Revolution failed to produce any significant revolutionary changes. They disagreed with the notion that the Revolution

²⁵ Eric Zolov, “Expanding Our Conceptual Horizons: The Shift from an Old to a New Left in Latin America.”

²⁶ Bailey, 78.

caused a transition from semi-feudalism to capitalism. According to Cockcroft, Mexico had developed capitalism well before the Revolution. During the nineteenth century, including the Porfiriato years, agriculture became a “capitalist enterprise, as land was bought and sold on an open land market and peasants were further incorporated into the wage labor system.”²⁷ Cockcroft suggested that an economic revolution did not take place, because one sector of the bourgeoisie simply replaced another sector of the bourgeoisie as owners of the means of production.²⁸ Certain wealthy families backed Madero’s plan to stimulate and expand Mexico’s capitalist economy which had been bogged down by the monopolies of the Porfirian elite. “Essentially, they wanted a bigger share of the spoils, and entrance into the higher spheres of the [capitalist] system, rather than its destruction.”²⁹ After Madero’s initial call to arms against the Porfirian government, peasants and workers from various parts of the country participated in popular uprisings. Ruiz described the combination of events not as a Revolution, but as a “great rebellion.” He viewed the Mexican Revolution as a disorganized rebellion which pitted factions of the rebel family against each another.³⁰ Ruiz said that the leaders of the rebellion—Madero, Villa, Zapata, Obregón, and Carranza—ended up fighting each other because they did not have a unified plan.

The 1917 Constitution played an important part in the non-revolution model because, according to Ruiz and Cockcroft, the document stressed continuity over radical reform. While other Marxists praised the 1917 Constitution for its progressive laws—such as Article 27 which guaranteed the redistribution of peasant lands—Cockcroft and Ruiz believed that it was merely an affirmation or continuation of the 1857 liberal Constitution. “The legislation, while tempering the ideals of former rulers, upheld the principles of private property, of unfettered competition, and the sacred rights of the individual.”³¹ In other words, the new

²⁷ James D. Cockcroft, *Intellectual Precursors of the Mexican Revolution, 1910-1913* (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1968), 33.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 174.

²⁹ Ramón Eduardo Ruiz, *The Great Rebellion: Mexico 1905-1924* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1980), 411.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 7-8.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 6.

Constitution continued to support bourgeois values and ideas. The non-revolution model painted a pessimistic picture of 1917, the year when the major battles ended and when Carranza's government ratified the Constitution. Cockcroft examined the results of the great rebellion and asked: What exactly did the Revolution accomplish? He described the state of Mexico after the Revolution as follows: "a defeated peasantry, a crippled and dependent labor movement, a wounded but victorious bourgeoisie, and, for a divided Mexican people, a paper triumph—the 1917 Constitution."³² According to the non-revolution model, the rebellion resulted in the triumph of a new bourgeoisie, which effectively replaced the Porfirian bourgeoisie. As for the masses, they ended up in an unfavorable position once again. The proletariat failed to stage a unified uprising because they did not have a leader who could bring solidarity and ideology to the exploited classes.

Arnaldo Córdova, Donald Hodges and Ross Gandy developed a theory that resembled the non-revolution model in several ways. Córdova and the two Americans agreed that there were more continuities than revolutionary changes between the Porfiriato and the Mexican Revolution, and that the ongoing development of capitalism was the main element of continuity.³³ Córdova also refused to qualify the Mexican Revolution as an anti-imperialist revolution—an idea supported by the 1930s generation—because he claimed that foreign capitalists continued to invest in Mexico's economy during and after the Revolution.³⁴ What separated Córdova, Hodges, and Gandy from Ruiz and Cockcroft was that the first group of authors believed that a decisive political revolution occurred between 1910 and 1940. The political revolution consisted of the rise of a strong Bonapartist state which replaced the Porfirian dictatorship. In Marxist terminology, Bonapartism referred to the 1848 Revolution in France when Louis Bonaparte ended the conflict between workers,

³² James D. Cockcroft, *Intellectual Precursors of the Mexican Revolution, 1910-1913*, 235.

³³ Arnaldo Córdova, *La ideología de la revolución mexicana* (México DF: Ediciones Era, 1973), 15-16.

³⁴ Arnaldo Córdova, "México, Revolución y política de masas," in *Interpretaciones de la revolución mexicana* (México DF: Editorial Nueva Imagen, 1979), 76.

bourgeois bankers, and old regime landowners.³⁵ For Marx, Bonaparte's regime (1848-1871) represented an exception to the idea that "the class that rules economically also rules politically."³⁶ Córdova, Hodges, and Gandy suggested that the Mexican Revolution created a similar situation. Madero's bourgeois supporters, Villa's workers army, and Zapata's peasant insurgents all rebelled against the Porfirian dictatorship, but none of these factions had the capacity to hold political power. Mexico therefore needed a strong Bonapartist state to achieve political consolidation. Hodges and Gandy said that after the Revolution, "the bourgeoisie remained the economically dominant class, but in order to save its purse it gave up the crown."³⁷ That crown belonged to the new Bonapartist state.

According to the Bonapartist model, Mexico's postrevolutionary government strengthened its control over society throughout the 1920s and 1930s. The successive regimes of Alvaro Obregón, Plutarco Elías Calles, and Lázaro Cárdenas solidified the state's powerful position (above the proletariat and the bourgeoisie). The positive view of Lázaro Cárdenas, expressed previously by the 1930s generation, vanished in the Bonapartist model. By the 1970s, thirty years after Cárdenas's presidency, Córdova, Hodges, and Gandy began to see the postrevolutionary government not as progressive and proto-socialist, but as hegemonic, bureaucratic, and even authoritarian. According to the Bonapartist model, the state co-opted peasants and workers by employing a strategy called *política de masas*.³⁸ The ruling class attempted to appease the masses by promoting social reforms, but at the same time, it also protected the bourgeoisie by supporting the expansion of capitalism. "The state thus appears to be both the benefactor and protector of the have-nots and the impartial voucher for the rights of the haves."³⁹ Córdova suggested that the peasants, and the masses in general, were merely "human resources" in the armed struggle because they were incapable of "providing the agenda, nor the ideology, nor

³⁵ Karl Marx, "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon," in *The Marx Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1978), 606-607.

³⁶ Hodges and Gandy, 125.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 127.

³⁸ The term *política de masas* can be translated as "mass politics," or politics of the masses.

³⁹ Córdova, *La ideología de la revolución mexicana*, 268.

the political direction of any revolution.”⁴⁰ Córdova’s comment on the peasantry resembled Ramos Pedrueza’s argument about the peasants and workers lacking class consciousness. The difference was that Ramos Pedrueza foresaw the eventual indoctrination of the masses, while Córdova believed that the state’s policies, including *política de masas*, would keep the masses in a subordinate position, underneath the strong Bonapartist state.

The third Marxist model of the 1970s generation, Enrique Semo’s cycle of bourgeois revolutions, responded to several key points made by the Bonapartist and non-revolution models. Semo agreed that a form of capitalism existed before the Revolution, but he claimed that it was not fully developed. According to his model, the Mexican Revolution represented a third wave in the cycle of bourgeois revolutions which began in 1810. Semo suggested that each wave of revolutions brought the bourgeoisie one step closer to the full establishment of capitalism. The Independence Wars (1810-1821), for example, produced a modern nation-state and abolished the colonial *sistema de castas*, two factors which allowed for a more open and free society.⁴¹ The second revolutionary wave occurred during the Reforma wars, which resulted in the destruction of the Church’s feudal land monopoly and the indigenous communal landholdings.⁴² The redistribution process made the lands optimal for capitalist production. The final wave of the cycle was the Mexican Revolution, which transformed the Porfiriato’s brand of capitalism—monopolies financed by foreign investors—into an independent, open, and dynamic capitalist system. Semo argued that by 1940, the bourgeoisie had nothing more to reform and no more revolutionary waves to complete. “The bourgeoisie represented a transformative force in the history of our country, but as of that moment it became reactionary.”⁴³

⁴⁰ Córdova, “México, Revolución y política de masas,” 69.

⁴¹ A *casta* was a person of mixed race, and the *sistema de castas* was a social hierarchy used during the colonial period which determined social status based on race.

⁴² Enrique Semo, *Historia mexicana: economía y lucha de clases* (México DF: Serie Popular Era, 1978), 299-315.

⁴³ Enrique Semo, “Reflexiones sobre la revolución mexicana,” in

The structure of Semo's model coincided with Ramos Pedrueza's idea of the stages of class struggle, but the difference was that Semo traced the evolution of capitalism, and not the gradual development of the proletariat. In fact, Semo said that the waves of bourgeois revolutions succeeded because "of their timing and because of the absence of the proletariat."⁴⁴ In Semo's model, the proletariat became a real factor only after capitalism had been established. Before the Mexican Revolution, the masses served as an enabler for the bourgeoisie because they "tilted the pendulum of history far enough so that the goals of the bourgeoisie can be consolidated."⁴⁵ Semo agreed with Córdova, Hodges, and Gandy's argument that the postrevolutionary state tried to manipulate and control the masses. However, unlike those Marxists, Semo believed that by 1940 the state was comparatively weak. He suggested that the development of capitalism depended on the labor (and exploitation) of the working classes. This in turn allowed the proletariat to expand its size and to become stronger and better organized. As a result, Semo concluded that at the end of the cycle of bourgeois revolutions, a united proletariat will invariably pose a threat to the stability of the bourgeoisie and to the state's hegemonic control.

Adolfo Gilly's theory of interrupted revolution, the last of the Marxist interpretations considered in this essay, combined several elements from the other Marxist models. First, Gilly agreed with Córdova, Hodges, and Gandy's overall assessment of the postrevolutionary government. He acknowledged that Obregón's Bonapartist state strengthened its political power by "placating all the classes while acting in the interest of one: the national bourgeoisie."⁴⁶ In Gilly's model, however, the state's hegemonic control was strictly temporary. Unlike the Bonapartist model, Gilly's theory suggested that the masses would eventually, and necessarily, break free because the Revolution had not yet concluded. As with Louis Bonaparte, Obregón's opportunistic state imposed its will on a fragmented society, but Gilly believed that the

Interpretaciones de la revolución mexicana, 147.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 148.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 147.

⁴⁶ Adolfo Gilly, "La guerra de clases en la revolución mexicana (Revolución permanente y auto-organización de las masas)," in *Interpretaciones de la revolución mexicana*, 48.

proletarian fragments of that society would inevitably carry out a revolution that “was interrupted...but not defeated. [The Revolution 1910-1920] was unable to keep going forward, but its forces were not broken or dispersed, and its essential causes were not lost or abandoned.”⁴⁷

Like Ramos Pedrueza, Gilly believed that the Mexican Revolution fostered the necessary conditions for a socialist revolution. He disagreed, however, on the source of the future revolution. While Ramos Pedrueza pointed to the socialist teachers and intellectuals who could use Cárdenas’s educational program to indoctrinate the proletariat, Gilly referred to Zapata’s peasant army as the vanguard of socialism. According to Gilly’s model, Zapata’s rebels engaged in a permanent revolution whose ideology and objectives differed from the bourgeois movement of Madero, Carranza, and Obregón. The 1917 Constitution was supposed to bring an end to the Revolution, but Zapata and his peasant supporters rejected the state’s proposal. Gilly explained that “the revolution had not triumphed, the land had not been redistributed. The Zapatistas refused to lay down their weapons and dissolve their army; they developed their own agenda...and tenaciously continued their struggle.”⁴⁸ Gilly argued that the Zapatistas, because of their advanced class consciousness and their commitment to permanent revolution, represented the path toward socialism. The problem was that their initial insurrection was thwarted by the Bonapartist regime. Nonetheless, the assassination of Emiliano Zapata in 1919 did not put an end to the insurrection, it merely interrupted it. Gilly’s model of interrupted revolution therefore suggested that the peasants still aimed to continue and complete the revolution, and that it was only a matter of time before other sectors of the proletariat joined the permanent revolution.

Since 1980, the interpretive models developed by Marxist historians from the 1930s and 1970s have gradually lost favor among traditionalist and revisionist scholars. A number of historiographical essays in the 1980s and 1990s described the Marxist views as inadequate or, in some cases, neglected to even mention them. In an essay published in *Secuencia*, for

⁴⁷ Adolfo Gilly, *La revolución interrumpida, México 1910-1920; una guerra campesina por la tierra y el poder* (México DF: Ediciones “El caballito,” 1971), 394.

⁴⁸ Gilly, “La guerra de clases en la revolución mexicana,” 30.

example, Alan Knight outlined the different generations of scholars who contributed to the historiography of the Mexican Revolution; yet the 1930s Marxists were conspicuously absent from his summary. As for the 1970s generation, he briefly mentioned the work of Adolfo Gilly and called it “rather schematic and lacking in original data.”⁴⁹ But rejecting or minimizing the Marxist contribution will only impoverish the historiographical debate, which should include a variety of viewpoints and traditions. In the words of Luis Anaya Merchant, “examining the differences between previous and current interpretations of the past is the work of the historiographic project.”⁵⁰ Marxist interpretations therefore should not be too easily discarded, since they could be seen as potential building blocks in the construction of a pluralistic and democratic historiography of the Mexican Revolution.

The Marxist models of the Mexican Revolution provided several interpretative strategies that should be salvaged and preserved by contemporary Mexicanist scholars. Two in particular, which were developed by Enrique Semo and Arnaldo Córdova, can still enrich our understanding of the economic and socio-political transformations that occurred during the Mexican Revolution. First, Semo’s idea of the cycle of bourgeois revolutions offered a compelling explanation as to why the Revolution ended in 1940 and why the country’s economic policies took a conservative shift after that year. Semo suggested that the bourgeoisie advanced the development of capitalism in Mexico by staging a wave of reforms, or revolutions, throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁵¹ The purpose of the reforms was to create a market economy that would allow the bourgeoisie to displace the oligarchic monopolies of the old regime. The last year of Cárdenas’s presidency (1940) marked the end of the revolutionary cycle because at this point, Semo concluded, Mexico had fully installed capitalism. With the system finally in place, the bourgeoisie stopped its pursuit of reforms and therefore turned into a reactionary force. Semo’s theory could help historians explain why the state

⁴⁹ Alan Knight, “Interpretaciones recientes de la Revolución mexicana,” *Secuencia*, 13, (1989): 30.

⁵⁰ Luis Anaya Merchant, “La construcción de la memoria y la revisión de la revolución,” *Historia Mexicana*, 44, 4 (1995): 535.

⁵¹ Semo, “Reflexiones sobre la revolución mexicana,” 146.

ended the 1930s process of land distribution and subsequently reopened the Mexican economy to the world market and foreign investment.⁵²

The second Marxist concept that modern historians might do well to remember is Arnaldo Córdova's idea of *política de masas*. When scholars explain the process of state consolidation (1920-1940), Córdova's *política de masas* could help illustrate how the postrevolutionary state was able to maintain political power over a divided and broken nation. Córdova suggested that the Mexican Revolution produced a powerful Bonapartist state which placed itself above the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. The state accomplished this feat by employing *política de masas*, a policy which placated the masses by promoting a populist agenda while simultaneously favoring bourgeois ideals. The façade of populism functioned as an important hegemonic and counter-revolutionary tool. According to Córdova, the state strengthened its control over the population by manipulating the masses and by annihilating independent popular movements.⁵³ Córdova wanted to illustrate one way in which the PRI (Institutional Revolutionary Party) imposed cultural and political hegemony. Historians usually describe the PRI's rise to power by referring to the state's official ideology, or myth, which promoted social, political, racial, and cultural unity. To expand the idea of hegemony and state consolidation, those same historians could incorporate the *política de masas* concept because it connects the manipulative power of the official ideology to the state's ability to control society.

Not every part of the Marxist models, of course, is a potentially useful building block. One element that weakened the Marxist interpretations was that most authors from both the 1930s and 1970s generations supported the teleological conclusion that the Mexican

⁵² The land distribution reforms of the 1930s were part of President Lázaro Cárdenas's program to fulfill the promises of the 1917 Constitution. Article 27 was designed specifically to appease the insurgent peasants in the countryside by guaranteeing the fair redistribution of the old hacienda lands. After the Cárdenas administration, however, little effort was done by the state to implement this Constitutional reform. "Since the presidency of Lázaro Cárdenas, Mexico's political bosses gradually set aside original revolutionary objectives, as articulated in the Plan de Ayala and the Constitution of 1917, in favor of maintaining political control and overseeing economic development," from Michael J. Gonzales, *The Mexican Revolution, 1910-1940*, 262.

⁵³ Córdova, *La ideología de la revolución mexicana*, 33.

Revolution will inevitably become (or lead to) a socialist revolution. Adolfo Gilly, for example, ended his book by alluding to the future class struggle and proletariat victory: “The Mexican Revolution, through its central forces—workers, peasants, students and anti-imperialist petite bourgeoisie—passionately confronts its past in order to organize its present struggle and prepare for its future victories.”⁵⁴ The problem with this conclusion is that it strays from historical analysis and delves into the realm of speculation. When Marxists say something like this, it seems as if they are trying to force the history of the Mexican Revolution into a specific Marxist vision of the world. Several non-Marxist historians have criticized Marxist interpretations for making assumptions about the future. Alan Knight, for example, convincingly argued that teleologies must be rejected because the Revolution did not set the country on a fixed and immutable course.⁵⁵ The monographs written by Marxist historians certainly have their flaws, and because of this they ought to be subject to critical assessment. However, these same monographs also hold useful insights that remain relevant to the present and future historiography.

Certain parts of the Marxist methodology do not need to be salvaged because they are already playing a subtle part in the historiography. The problem is that Marxist influence remains either unappreciated or understated. One example of this “subtle influence” lies in Alan Knight’s own work. Although he has criticized the merits of Marxism in several articles, Knight acknowledged that Marxist terminology, such as the concepts of *bourgeois* and *socialist* revolutions, still “offer the best global categories for making sense of revolutionary phenomena.”⁵⁶ He used such Marxist vocabulary to characterize the Mexican Revolution as a bourgeois revolution. Knight arrived at this conclusion by saying that the Revolution “gave a decisive impulse to the development of Mexican capitalism and of the Mexican bourgeoisie, an impulse which the preceding regime had been unable to give.”⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Gilly, *La revolución interrumpida*, 399.

⁵⁵ Alan Knight, “The Mexican Revolution: Bourgeois? Nationalist? Or just a ‘Great Rebellion?’” *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, 4, 2 (1985): 13.

⁵⁶ Alan Knight, “Social Revolution: A Latin American Perspective,” *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, 9, 2 (1990): 183.

⁵⁷ Knight, “The Mexican Revolution: Bourgeois? Nationalist? Or just a

Knight's general argument about the Revolution's impact on capitalism and the bourgeoisie had been advanced earlier by Marxist historians. Yet, he distanced himself from the Marxists by developing a nuanced argument that denied both economic determinism and a dramatic and revolutionary change. Knight argued that Marxist historians interpreted economic change as the result of a sequential order of events that led to a revolution and its logical outcome. He countered this theory by explaining that the economic system in Mexico changed over time not because of a "single, knockout, revolutionary punch" but because of an accumulation of blows which had a percussive, and not sequential, relationship to the Revolution.⁵⁸ Though Knight assumed that Marxist historians perceived economic change as the result of eruptions of class conflict, he underestimated the variety of interpretations that existed among the Marxists. Enrique Semo, for example, presented an idea that by and large resembles the one offered later by Knight. In his discussion of the cycle of bourgeois revolutions, Semo also described change as gradual, claiming that "the Marxists have never conceived the transformation of feudalism to capitalism as the result of a single assault, brought upon by one revolution."⁵⁹ On the contrary, he claimed that "change took place after a series of assaults, after a succession of 'revolutionary waves' and periods of reform, which were separated by phases of stability, stagnation, and regression."⁶⁰ Knight may have supported the revisionist and traditionalist move to avoid Marxist interpretations, but the evidence presented above suggests that Marxism informed at least part of his own approach.

In conclusion, the Marxist models developed by the 1930s and 1970s generations could be used to fill some of the gaps in the historiography of the Mexican Revolution. Perhaps the most prominent gap is the recent dearth of studies that provide a synthesis of the Mexican Revolution. A number of factors have understandably discouraged historians from producing new syntheses: the complexity of the Revolution, the availability of specialized archival sources, the growth of regional

'Great Rebellion?',” 26.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁵⁹ Enrique Semo, *Historia mexicana: economía y lucha de clases*, 299.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

studies, the existence of a well-respected synthesis in Alan Knight's *The Mexican Revolution* (1986), the challenge of writing a two hundred page monograph about such a massive event without leaving out crucial details, etc. Yet, new syntheses may be needed. Not just to make life easier for professors who teach undergraduate courses on Mexican history, but more importantly to continue the debates about the overall character and process of the Revolution.

In a review essay written in 1987, Paul Vanderwood made an observation about the state of Mexican historiography that remains generally true at present time: we have building blocks but yet no building.⁶¹ Specialized and regional studies (the building blocks) abound, but few syntheses (the building) have been written since 1987.⁶² Ultimately the goal cannot be to form one infallible building, since the sheer size of the historiography would make consensus impossible, but perhaps the goal should be to construct several competing and interconnected buildings out of the available building blocks. And to pursue the metaphor further, instead of excluding Marxism from this "building complex" (i.e. historiography), Marxist interpretations can be used as frameworks for some of the buildings in the complex. The recent revision and republication of Adolfo Gilly's *La revolución interrumpida* is an encouraging step towards re-admitting Marxism into current historiographical debates, but additional new studies are needed to enrich the quality and diversity of these debates.⁶³ And to develop future interpretations of the Mexican Revolution, historians might do well to keep in mind the ideas about class relations, state formation, and socio-economic transformations that were introduced by two generations of Marxists.

⁶¹ Paul Vanderwood, "Building Blocks but Yet No Building: Regional History and the Mexican Revolution," *Mexican Studies/Estudios Mexicanos*, 3, 2 (1987): 421-432.

⁶² Besides Michael J. Gonzales (2002), the last groundbreaking works of synthesis were published in the mid-1980s: Francois-Xavier Guerra (1985), Alan Knight (1986), and John Mason Hart (1987).

⁶³ Adolfo Gilly, *The Mexican Revolution: A People's History*, tr. Patrick Camiller (New York, The New Press, 2005).

Bibliography

- Bailey, David C. "Revisionism and the Recent Historiography of the Mexican Revolution." *Hispanic American Historical Review*, 58, 1 (1978): 62-79.
- Benjamin, Thomas and Mark Wasserman, ed. *Provinces of the Revolution: Essays on Regional Mexican History, 1910-1929*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1990.
- Bernstein, Harry. "Marxismo en México, 1917-1925." *Historia Mexicana*, 7, 4 (1958): 497-516.
- Córdova, Arnaldo. *La ideología de la revolución mexicana*. México DF: Ediciones Era, 1973.
- Cockroft, James D. *Intellectual Precursors of the Mexican Revolution, 1910-1913*. Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1968.
- Falcón, Romana. *Revolución y caciquismo: San Luis Potosí, 1910-1938*. México DF: Colegio de México, 1984.
- Fowler-Salamini, Heather. "The Boom in Regional Studies of the Mexican Revolution: Where is it Leading?" *Latin American Research Review*, 28, 2 (1993): 175-190.
- Gilly, Adolfo. *La revolución interrumpida, México, 1910-1920; una guerra campesina por la tierra y el poder*. México DF: Ediciones "El caballito," 1971.
- _____. *The Mexican Revolution: A People's History*. Translated by Patrick Camiller. New York: The New Press, 2005.
- Gilly, Adolfo, Arnaldo Córdova, Armando Bartra, Manuel Aguilar Mora, and Enrique Semo. *Interpretaciones de la revolución mexicana*. México DF: Editorial Nueva Imagen, 1979.
- Gonzales, Michael J. *The Mexican Revolution, 1910-1940*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2002.
- Guerra, Francois-Xavier. *Le Mexique de l'Ancien Régime à la Révolution*. Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 1985.
- Hart, John Mason. *Revolutionary Mexico: The Coming and Process of the Mexican Revolution*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987.

- Hodges, Donald and Ross Gandy. *Mexico 1910-1982, Reform or Revolution?* London: Zed Press, 1979.
- Morales Jiménez, Alberto. *Historia de la Revolución Mexicana*. México DF: Instituto de Investigaciones Políticas, Económicas y Sociales del Partido Revolucionario Institucional, 1951.
- Joseph, Gilbert. *Revolution from Without: Yucatan, Mexico, and the United States, 1880- 1924*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982.
- Knight Alan. "The Mexican Revolution: Bourgeois? Nationalist? Or just a 'Great Rebellion'?" *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, 4, 2 (1985): 1-37.
- _____. *The Mexican Revolution*. 2 vols. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986.
- _____. "Interpretaciones recientes de la Revolución mexicana." *Secuencia*, 13 (1989): 24-43.
- _____. "Social Revolution: A Latin American Perspective." *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, 9, 2 (1990): 175-202.
- _____. "Revisionism and Revolution: Mexico Compared to England and France." *Past and Present*, 134 (1992): 159-199.
- Marx, Karl. "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon." In *The Marx Engels Reader*, edited by Robert C. Tucker. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1978.
- Merchant, Luis Anaya. "La construcción de la memoria y la revisión de la revolución." *Historia Mexicana*, 44, 4 (1995): 525-536.
- Rajchenberg, Enrique. "Las figuras heroicas de la revolución en los historiadores protomarxistas." *Secuencia*, 28 (1994): 49-64.
- Ramos Pedrueza, Rafael. *La lucha de clases a través de la historia de México: Ensayo Marxista*. México DF: Talleres Gráficos de la Nación, 1936.
- _____. *La lucha de clases a través de la historia de México: Revolución democraticoburguesa*. México DF: Talleres Gráficos de la Nación, 1941.
- Ruiz, Luis F. "History, Marxism, and Cultural Hegemony in Postrevolutionary Mexico: The Forgotten Case of Rafael Ramos

- Pedruenza." M.A. Thesis, University of Oregon, 2007.
- Ruiz, Ramón Eduardo. *The Great Rebellion: Mexico 1905-1924*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1980.
- Sánchez Quintanar, Andrea. *Tres socialistas frente a la Revolución mexicana: José Mancisidor, Rafael Ramos Pedruenza, Alfonso Teja Zabre*. México DF: Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, 1994.
- _____. "El pensamiento histórico de Alfonso Teja Zabre." *Anuario de historia*, 6 (1966): 65-90.
- Semo, Enrique. *Historia mexicana: economía y lucha de clases*. México DF: Serie Popular Era, 1978.
- Tannenbaum, Frank. *The Mexican Agrarian Revolution*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1929.
- _____. *Peace by Revolution: An Interpretation of Mexico*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1933.
- Teja Zabre, Alfonso. *Historia de México, introducción y sinopsis. La biografía de México*. México DF: Universidad Nacional de México, 1933.
- _____. *Panorama histórico de la revolución mexicana*. México DF: Ediciones Botas, 1939.
- Troncoso, Alberto del Castillo. "Alfonso Teja Zabre y Rafael Ramos Pedruenza: Dos interpretaciones marxistas en la década de los treinta." *Iztapalapa*, 22, 51 (2001): 225-238.
- Vanderwood, Paul. "Building Blocks but Yet No Building: Regional History and the Mexican Revolution." *Mexican Studies/Estudios Mexicanos*, 3, 2 (1987): 421- 432.
- Wasserman, Mark. "The Mexican Revolution: Region and Theory, Signifying Nothing?" *Latin American Research Review*, 25, 1 (1990): 231-242.