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### **Review/Reseña**

Benjamin T. Smith, *Pistoleros and Popular Movements: The Politics of State Formation in Postrevolutionary Oaxaca*. Lincoln, Neb.: University of Nebraska Press, 2009.

### **Beyond Cardenismo: From Postrevolutionary to Postwar History in Mexico**

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Benjamin T. Smith's *Pistoleros and Popular Movements: The Politics of State Formation in Postrevolutionary Oaxaca* reflects at least two welcome developments in Mexican studies. First, richly documented, archive-based historical works that extend the field beyond the Revolutionary era “endpoint” of 1940 are appearing in increasing numbers. Second, the historiography of postrevolutionary Mexican politics has clearly grown sophisticated and complex enough to do its fascinating subject justice. Studies by historians and (more commonly) social scientists published in the mid-twentieth century tended to highlight the changes wrought by the Revolution and the accomplishments of postrevolutionary governments, and used words like “pluralist” or “democratizing” to

characterize the Mexican state. These works were followed by a wave of “revisionist” studies in the 1960s, 1970s, and beyond that focused on the authoritarian, intrusive, anti-popular nature of the Mexican regime. Neither body of work really captured the intricacies, contradictions, and regional variations of the country’s unique political system. Most works of political history published over the last two decades have sought to transcend the two approaches. Some historians, especially those who focus on the government of Lázaro Cárdenas (1934-1940) as the culmination of the revolutionary process—an interpretation the revisionists rejected—even refer to their work as “post-revisionist.”<sup>1</sup> But really by now the old bifurcated categories have become irrelevant, and historiographical camps have formed more around methodology, theory, level of analysis, and topic of focus than around any sweeping interpretive question.

In addition to making the obligatory objections to pluralist and revisionist histories, Smith situates *Pistoleros and Popular Movements* in opposition to one particular newer approach, one he terms “neo Gramscian” scholarship, which, he writes, has “emphasized the role of hegemony in framing the boundaries of debate between different social groups” (7).<sup>2</sup> Smith applauds how this literature has “helped scholars move away from previous static interpretations of the relationship between domination and resistance in the process of state building.” At the same time he criticizes its tendency to exaggerate the coherency and penetrative ability of government programs, projects, and ideology while overlooking the state’s use of coercion and violence. Each previous approach to state formation, he concludes, “fails to describe the sheer panoply of regional arrangements enacted by the Mexican state” (5). A fine-grained regional case study, the author argues, provides the best opportunity to “reconstruct a more realistic appreciation of the national project.” (5) The result has its

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, John Jay Dwyer, *The Agrarian Dispute: The Expropriation of American-owned Rural Land in Postrevolutionary Mexico* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> The two “neo-Gramscian” works that he cites with this summary are Gilbert M. Joseph and Daniel Nugent, eds., *Everyday Forms of State Formation: Revolution and the Negotiation of Rule in Modern Mexico* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994) and Mary Kay Vaughn, *Cultural Politics in Revolution: Teachers, Peasants, and Schools in Mexico, 1930-1940* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1997).

flaws—Smith’s coverage of the years 1940 to 1952 is both more interesting and innovative than his examination of the pre-1940 period, and the book suffers from a narrow approach to political analysis and from occasionally monotonous attention to detail. Overall, however, *Pistoleros and Popular Movements* stands as an impressive, scholarly depiction of a quarter century of Oaxacan history. The book is a tremendously well-documented, remarkably thorough and multilayered study of politics in an important Mexican state.

Following an introduction and background chapter on the Porfiriato, Revolution, and 1920s, *Pistoleros and Popular Movements* devotes one chapter to the Maximato (1928-1934) in Oaxaca, four to *oaxaqueños’* experience with *Cardenismo* (1934-1940), and four chapters total to the *sexenios* of presidents Manuel Ávila Camacho (1940-1946) and Miguel Alemán Valdés (1946-1952). For each period, Smith describes the state governor and his *camarilla* (network of political supporters), and delineates the governor’s policies toward and relations with the state’s extraordinarily diverse administrative districts. The author argues throughout that local actors altered, renegotiated, or redirected presidential policies at every step, and that state formation was marked by a “dual process of centralization and decentralization” (403). Chapter one details how Francisco López Cortés, Oaxaca’s top official from 1928 to 1932, attempted to establish rule that would neither leave him entirely beholden to Mexico City nor to popular forces in the state. The governor established Oaxaca-based labor confederations independent of the leading national group, the Regional Confederation of Mexican Workers (CROM), and peasant unions free of control from Mexico City yet less radical than the peasant leagues in neighboring Veracruz. López Cortés supported the flourishing American banana companies in the Tuxtepec region while distributing just enough land to peasants to head off unrest. In economically peripheral areas of the state, however, local political bosses exerted far more influence than the governor.

Echoing Ben Fallaw’s interpretation of Yucatán in the 1930s, Smith argues that in Oaxaca *Cardenismo* was neither the hagiographers’ transformative social force nor the revisionists’ instrument of top-down

control.<sup>3</sup> The president readily gave in to local concerns in his desire to maintain peace and national unity, and the national government displayed limited capacity to effect change in the state. Oaxacans significantly reshaped virtually every major Cárdenas initiative, including education, land reform, and labor and peasant organization. How policy was ultimately carried out continued to depend significantly on local political bosses in individual districts. Drawing on the research of Alan Knight, Wil Pansters, and James Greenberg, who have placed local bossism (*caciquismo*) at the center of their analyses of twentieth-century Mexico, Smith identifies four types of *caciquismo* in 1930s Oaxaca: ethno-militarist, *finquero*-plantocrat, commercial-*ranchero*, and authoritarian-*indigenista*.<sup>4</sup> “Although the monopoly party gradually asserted control in some regions,” the author concludes, “the political periphery was still the preserve of these local bosses and their pistol-wielding peasant posses” (192).

Although the four chapters on *Cardenismo* in Oaxaca provide a wealth of detail and Smith’s multi-angled analysis of *caciquismo* and other political relationships is highly illuminating, this section of the book is somewhat frustrating and less convincing than the remainder of the volume, in part because it contains several contradictions that the author does not resolve or evaluate. For example, Smith’s argument that Cárdenas’ Agrarian Department officials utilized local knowledge to effectively carry out their programs and meet *campesino* needs seems to stand his central claim on its head. Moreover, his case study of the Ixtlan district in the Sierra Juárez points to the effectiveness of “socialist education” in the mountainous area and the influence of teachers in the new schools. Finally, he acknowledges that Cárdenas and his handpicked gubernatorial candidate in 1936 did galvanize a younger generation of political officials who sought alternatives to politics as usual in Oaxaca. These and other examples create the impression that Smith, in his eagerness to refute

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<sup>3</sup> Ben Fallaw, *Cárdenas Compromised: The Failure of Reform in Postrevolutionary Yucatán* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001).

<sup>4</sup> Alan Knight and Wil Pansters, eds., *Caciquismo in Twentieth-Century Mexico* (London: Institute for the Study of the Americas, 2005); James B. Greenberg, “Caciques, Patronage, Factionalism and Variations among Local Forms of Capitalism,” in *Citizens of the Pyramid: Essays on Mexican Political Culture*, ed. Wil G. Pansters (Amsterdam: CEDLA, 1997), 309-36.

pluralist and revisionist accounts, overstates his case and excessively deflates *Cardenismo*. In addition, the author does not make a strong enough case for how his analysis represents an advance over “neo-Gramscian” approaches to the 1930s. For example, although he distances himself from her argument, Smith’s description of the programmatic and political interaction between Ministry of Public Education officials and local teachers and residents seems to support the validity of Mary Kay Vaughn’s analysis of *Cardenista* education in Sonora and Puebla in *Cultural Politics of Revolution*.

The second half of *Pistoleros and Popular Movements* is more satisfying than the first in part because it represents the fruits of some of the most thoroughgoing archival work any historian has done on the 1940s and early 1950s in Mexico, a time period greatly understudied in comparison to the 1930s. Here Smith also makes his most interesting and important arguments, which deal with three issues: urban politics, rural political violence, and the periodization of Mexico’s political history. In the 1940s, Smith argues, “The urbanization of Oaxaca city, increasing importance of small merchants, growing literacy of the urban population, and revival of the Catholic Church...ushered in a new political player: the popular cross class social movement” (242-43). These movements, which were politically heterogeneous in that they merged groups on the left, center, and right, generally included some combination of politicians and intellectuals from the National Action Party (PAN), members of Mexican Catholic Action (ACM), renters’ unions, representatives of market vendors’ organizations (many of whom were women), and students. Rallying around urban issues such as water supply and electrical service as well as frequently mobilizing opposition to new taxes, they were instrumental in the ousting of Oaxacan governors in 1947 and 1952. Smith argues that these movements reflected an important historical shift in Mexican urban politics:

In many ways the process of urban expansion, community building, and state confrontation echoed similar events in Mexico's major industrial cities during the Porfiriato. However, whereas pre-revolutionary social unrest in Veracruz, Tampico, or Mexico City was articulated through recourse to evolving discourses of dissident liberalism or socialism and class conflict, Mexico's postwar

provincial instability was more likely to be conveyed through the adoption or inversion of religious imagery or ritual. (287)

While modern urban politics propelled change in the state capital, change in the countryside was as likely to be accomplished by brute force as by political deal making. Gov. Vicente González Fernández, in office from 1940 to 1944, relied to a lesser extent than did his predecessors on local bosses, and he dealt with recalcitrant caciques violently. The resulting bloodshed prompted President Avila Camacho to increase the military presence in Oaxaca. Smith also presents important details on violent struggles for influence between rival factions of workers, *campesinos*, and peons in the countryside. Many historians have lamented the anti-democratic methods used by the state in struggles for control of the CTM and CNC, the dominant national labor and peasant organizations, respectively, in Mexico's major urban centers around the same time. Smith's research shows that in the countryside officials could be not just arbitrary but downright brutal.

One result of the decline of *caciquismo* and the disciplining of working-class organizations, the author argues, was the increasing congruence between national and local policy in Oaxaca during the Alemán Valdés administration. Like the president, Gov. Eduardo Vasconcelos, the first member of the old line valley aristocracy to have the post since before the revolution, neglected the peasant and labor confederations and instead made the national party's (newly christened the Institutional Revolutionary Party in 1946) so called "popular sector" (the National Confederation of Popular Organizations, or CNOP) a key player in his *camarilla*. Vasconcelos forged a ruling group typical of postwar Mexico in states like Oaxaca, an alliance of party officials, the rural bourgeoisie, and a shifting collection of urban interests, with peace maintained in the countryside by a growing Army presence. "In many ways," Smith concludes, "the period saw the definite local implementation of the policies of economic conservatism, centralization, and authoritarianism that revisionist historians and political scientists have posited for the earlier presidency of 1940 to 1946" (360).

In the end, then, *Pistoleros and Popular Movements* provides important insights into specifically *post-World War II* state formation, not just the *postrevolutionary* state formation of its title. Getting through the book can be difficult, as the author, while providing sophisticated political analysis, often serves more as an unselective relayer of information from the documents than a well-edited, reflective writer. The book is thus inappropriate for undergraduate students or general readers. It seems clear by the end that “pluralists” and “revisionists” are obsolete straw men who have had the stuffing knocked out of them, but it is not clear whether Smith’s work differs significantly enough from neo-Gramscian or other more recent approaches to represent a pathbreaking kind of revisionism. Still, Smith displays vast knowledge of Oaxacan history and of Mexican historiography, and engages with other historians’ work in highly productive ways. *Pistoleros and Popular Movements* is an astonishingly thorough work to which all students of twentieth century Oaxaca will have to refer, and it makes arguments about the post-1940 period that all historians of modern Mexico must consider.