



Vol. 7, No. 2, Winter 2010, 322-326
www.ncsu.edu/project/acontracorriente

Review/Reseña

William Beezley and Colin M. MacLachlan, *Mexicans in Revolution, 1910-1946: An Introduction*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009.

Re-Writing (Again) The Mexican Revolution

Edward Wright-Ríos

Vanderbilt University

It is always a challenge to find the right text for undergraduate history courses that address the Mexican Revolution and the span of decades we call the revolutionary period. (The Cuban Revolution presents a similar conundrum). Selected books cannot be too long lest students complain and/or deploy the college classroom version of “weapons of the weak” and simply pretend to actually read. Yet the ideal text covers causation, the chronology of armed struggle, the emergence of a new state, revolutionary reformism, a sense for regional complexities and tensions

that threatened the new order, and the character of key historical personalities. In addition, we want our students to understand how Mexican's made sense of the revolution in the generations that followed the storied upheaval, and how the post-revolutionary government grounded its legitimacy in an official history of the events. We want them to grasp the myths and the realities intertwined with the nation's rapid twentieth-century modernization, and how these have long been tethered to *the* Revolution and its legendary protagonists. It is a tall order, and not surprisingly the best books on the conflict and its aftermath are too long for most undergraduate classes. For many of us, getting the Mexican Revolution right is really the labor of a semester-long course in its own right. Since this is rarely possible, we keep searching for the book that will help us accomplish our goals without inciting rebellion among our students. In short, we eye each new book on the Revolution of 1910 with these exacting hopes and standards.

William Beezley and Colin MacLachlan, both well-known scholars, experienced teachers, editors, and co-authors of useful classroom texts (e.g. *El Gran Pueblo: A History of Greater Mexico*), attempt to address our needs with *Mexicans in Revolution, 1910-1946*. Clearly aware of the challenges, they subtitle (caveat?) their newest collaboration "An Introduction," and include a section at the very end of the book titled "Twenty-five Outstanding Books on Revolutionary Mexico." In addition, each chapter closes with a set of five to seven citations for "further reading." The text is attractively slim, finishing up in a tidy 172 pages from introduction to conclusion. All told the book is a reasonably effective political history spanning the period from the first sparks of revolt in 1910 to the emergence of the PRI (Institutional Revolutionary Party) in 1946. Still *Mexicans in Revolution* is not the longed-for short work on the Mexican Revolution that this reviewer hoped. Nonetheless, it may serve as a decent substitution for a different chronological narrative. *Mexicans in Revolution* could also provide the casual lay reader a serviceable short description of the revolutionary era.

The main problem with the book is its limited examination of revolutionary causation. The uninitiated reader is left to wonder why/how

the fighting started in the first place. This represents a particularly troubling omission since understanding the origins of social revolution represents one of the most important interdisciplinary enticements Latin American history dangles before young scholars and the general reading population. In many ways famed peasant movements, and all the romanticism that accompanies the popular historical memory of them, is what draws students to Mexican history. Hence, it is absolutely crucial that we take advantage of the “teaching moments” provided by the Pancho Villas and Emiliano Zapatas of the past. As we know, at the very least this entails wading into the issues of regional grievances and conditions, the nature of agrarian rebellion, late-nineteenth-century modernization and political centralization, and the vulnerabilities of the pre-revolutionary state. Furthermore, it is in the unraveling of starry-eyed notions of popular rebellion and addressing the unsavory realities of revolutionary state formation that the best class discussions often flourish.

The problem most likely stems from the brevity aspirations of the authors. It feels like the target length of this book was 150 pages. As it stands *Mexicans in Revolution* could be assigned as the reading for a single week. However, it appears that a better objective would have been the 195 page mark. It would still be manageable for students and the authors could have used an extra twenty pages to outline the revolution’s beginnings more effectively.

Part of what is at work is the authors’ encapsulation of the era as a time when a particular generation of political actors seized power and sought to shape Mexico’s destiny. Some readers will quibble with this approach, but given the tendency of many readers to focus on biography it works in this case. The individuals anchoring *Mexicans* are the trio of revolutionary caudillos who gained the presidency and served as the architects of the post-revolutionary order, Álvaro Obregón, Plutarco Elías Calles, and Lázaro Cárdenas. The heart of this book, then, resides in the 1920s and 1930s. The pre-1910 period and even the armed struggle represent a prologue for these three leaders’ respective political administrations. As a result, *Mexicans in Revolution* becomes most interesting once the authors get to the 1920s.

The chapters dedicated to the Obregón, Calles, and Cárdenas administrations and political turbulence and factional wrangling between their terms (as well as the tensions between these men) are the best. Readers gain a good grasp of the presidential personalities, the character of their close collaborators, the political and economic challenges leaders faced, and the often tense transitions that marked the nascent revolutionary state's efforts to consolidate power and institute reforms. *Mexicans in Revolution* demonstrates economically that political stability was certainly not a foregone conclusion in the dust settling decades, particularly when presidential power changed hands. Readers get a clear sense that these three presidents had to play politics carefully to stay alive and remain in power: we see how each of them broached relations with the United States, engaged the emerging power of organized labor, provoked and accommodated conservative anti-revolutionary groups, and kept the ambitions of fellow revolutionary generals in check.

There is a kind of quiet counter-revisionism at work in the narrative too. For the most part, these revolutionary caudillos emerge as essentially well-intentioned leaders who occasionally resorted to violence and authoritarian measures to bring about what they believed to be a better Mexico. Clearly the authors want to lead readers away from notions of a “frozen” or “betrayed” popular revolution that comes through other texts, although they avoid boring them with our historiographical obsessions. To their credit, they also resist lionizing Cárdenas. The revolutionary presidents emerge as pragmatists with considerable political savvy navigating treacherous circumstances. *Mexicans in Revolution* also provides a useful overview of Mexico's political reorientation amidst World War II and the administration of Manuel Avila Camacho. In keeping with its focus on the “revolutionary generation” the book comes to a natural end in 1946. It works in both biographical and political periodizations at the center of the book's narrative. When Miguel Alemán won the presidency and reorganized and renamed the governing party, the string of revolutionary generals in the presidential chair came to an end, and the evolution of Mexican politics truly took a distinctly different direction.

Finally, the authors offer a portrayal of historical experience (i.e. the Mexicans *in* Revolution). The book provides just enough digression from the political narrative to give readers a basic sense for how Mexican lives changed during the period. They also address these issues in a short final chapter preceding the conclusion. Some readers will undoubtedly feel that more emphasis on daily life, race, gender, and culture change would have been better, but, given the introductory ends of the text, *Mexicans in Revolution* provides just enough to prompt the curious and inspired to take a deeper plunge in the rich scholarly literature. In general, the authors provide good suggestions for those who are so inclined.

For those who teach undergraduate Latin American history courses, then, the question is if *Mexicans in Revolution* merits adoption. In many ways it is unfair to criticize this book because of the complexity of the revolutionary conflict, the deep historiographical legacy of the storied conflict, and our exacting expectations. Nonetheless, if a general history, such as the authors' *El Gran Pueblo* or a combination of essays gleaned from a text like *The Oxford History of Mexico* (a Beezley co-edited book), works well in a particular teaching situation this text is not likely to replace them. Likewise, those who use Michael Gonzales's *The Mexican Revolution* and remain comfortable with 270-page length are unlikely to be swayed. *Mexicans in Revolution*, however, could work well in an introductory survey with supporting materials: first and foremost some carefully chosen readings on the causes of the Mexican Revolution are imperative; then perhaps some primary documents, a short story or two, and maybe a film will complement the narrative presented in the text nicely.