

Review:

Antonio Escobar Ohmstede and Matthew Butler (eds.), *Mexico in Transition: New Perspectives on Mexican Agrarian History, Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries/México y sus transiciones: reconsideraciones sobre la historia agraria mexicana, siglos XIX y XX* (Mexico City: CIESAS/LLILAS, 2013. Digital edition: <http://hdl.handle.net/2152/20399>)

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I

Given the New Cultural History's predominant role in shaping scholarly debates in 20th Mexican historiography from the mid-1990s until very recently (especially in the U.S.), this volume makes an especially welcome and important contribution. To wit, it makes a convincing case that in negotiations between the state and subaltern groups, agrarian issues matter, and—just as importantly—we need to consider long-overlooked key actors, specifically a cluster of “rural entities” including municipal corporations, haciendas and peon communities, agrarian colonies and agrarian societies (pp. 33-34). Ben Smith's chapter on agrarian societies in the Oaxacan Mixtec, for example, shows how productive the study of these under-studied actors can be. Secondly, the volume calls for a new “agrarian morphology” that takes environmental, productive, demographic, cultural, and political variables into account (p. 34). Here, though, I would add one more variable: the economic. Emilia Viotti da Costa warns of the danger of rejecting the economic reductionism of revisionist, Marxist-inspired scholarship of the 1970s and 1980s, only to fall into cultural reductionism.¹ Third, there is the question of chronology, and the provocative argument to see the Revolution of 1910 not as a watershed between classical or 19th-century liberalism and revolutionary socialism Mexican style, but instead the

¹ “New Publics, New Politics, New Histories: From Economic Reductionism to Cultural Reductionism—in Search of Dialectics,” in Gilbert Joseph (ed.), *Reclaiming the Political in Latin American History* (Durham, 2001), 10.

continuation of efforts by a liberal postcolonial state to replace corporate with individual landholding. The editors themselves add two sensible caveats: revolutionary agrarian struggles were real, and the postrevolutionary state gave peasant communities a way to do an end-run around municipal and state officials through the federal agrarian bureaucracy with the Comisión Nacional Agraria at the apex.

II

This said, I want to begin the substantive part of this critical review by addressing a central question related to the state, agrarian mobilization, and chronology, one that Sal Salinas's chapter usefully poses: why was it the CROM (Confederación Regional Obrera Mexicana), and not the PNA (Partido Nacional Agrarista), that emerged in the 1920s as the preferred corporatist intermediary between the Sonoran state and the countryside?

This question itself is perhaps surprising. After all, the CROM has been long maligned as a corrupt conglomeration of yellow unions dominated by the thuggish, corpulent, and unprincipled Luis Morones, with the possible exception of the well-studied textile syndicates in Puebla and Morelos. Carefully examining the social base of the CROM in other states, as Salinas does in Morelos, reveals that it had a strong popular base (although not necessarily in the industrial proletariat). Research on Zacatecas's CROM between 1923 and 1929 corroborates Salinas's finding, and moreover reveals a cadre of radical cromista politicians who were good militia officers. The CROM in Zacatecas had a network of 242 revolutionary urban and rural sindicatos that fashioned an alternative radical culture (class conscious, nationalistic, secular). The CROM also supported individual and collective economic advancement via small farming and producer cooperatives, as well as providing crucial military support to the Sonoran state during key national crises. Founded in Zacatecas in 1917, the CROM suffered political marginalization and sporadic violent harassment for six years at the hands of obregonistas (generally a conservative bunch in Zacatecas) as well as even more conservative politicians linked to Catholic lay leaders from the middle and upper class. Paramilitary service in the delahuertista revolt (and subsequently the cristero war and the Escobar rebellion) reversed the CROM's electoral fortunes, enabling its candidates to overcome hostile state and local officials and its now well-armed and battle tested sindicatos to stand down white guards and police.²

Calles took notice, too. With Morones in tow, the new president spoke at the CROM's Zacatecan labor federation's founding in April 1925, promising both individual parcels and collective ejidos for the peasants "mejoramiento."³ Fearing a cristero victory

² Sandra Kuntz Ficker and Luis Jáuregui, "Entre el pasado y el presente: 1867-1940," in Oleague Flores (ed.), *La fragua de una leyenda: historia mínima de Zacatecas* (Mexico City, 1995), 171; María Ruth López Ruiz and Soledad Sotelo Belmontes "Los agitados años después de la revolución 1917-32," in Ramón Vera Salvo (ed.), *Historia de la cuestión agraria mexicana, estado de Zacatecas vol. II: 1940* (Mexico City, 1992), 92-172.

³ López and Sotelo, "Los agitados años," 95-96, 144. This dual-track approach was not new. In 1919, the CROM of Zacatecas sought the support of key *obregonista* leader and former governor Enrique Estrada to apply Zacatecas' unique agrarian reform, *fraccionamiento*, in which large estates were broken down into individual parcels supported by the revolutionary state as opposed to being granted in collectively owned ejidos, but the obregonista governor Donato Moreno halted it, as did Obregón and Carranza. Estrada

in the spring of 1928, President Calles rushed to the Altos of Jalisco; while passing through cromista Jérez, Zacatecas, on April 5, 1928, Calles renewed his pact with the assembled revolutionary paramilitaries of the CROM, proclaiming “están de acuerdo en defender sus parcelas con el rifle en la mano” (Calles omitted the collective ejido.)⁴ Right up until his break with Morones’s organization, Calles patronized CROM sindicatos as his preferred faction in Zacatecas. From 1924 to 1929, cromista candidates monopolized federal congressional seats, the governorship, state congress, and most municipalities in central and northern Zacatecas.⁵ At the PNR’s first presidential convention, diputado and sub-commander of the revolutionary defensa, José Jesús Delgado, lauded his state’s “campesinos, naked, hungry but with love for their carbines, they stand on their own two feet to defend the Revolution’s goals in the [cristero strongholds in the] canyons of Juchipila and Tlaltenango.”⁶

In late 1928 Calles’s new Partido Nacional Revolucionario sought to incorporate all “revolutionary elements.” Under strong pressure from followers of the assassinated ex-president Obregón, interim president Emilio Portes Gil, and many generals, Calles excluded cromista czar Morones from the PNR, confident that with the labor czar sidelined the CROM’s many strong constituents would be incorporated piecemeal.⁷ When cromista Governor Alfredo Medina of Zacatecas refused Calles’s offer to leave the CROM and join the PNR, he was deposed (and assassinated four years later). Calles then turned to the brutal federal general Anacleto López Morales and conservative obregonista and even cristero and Porfirian-era politicians to found the PNR’s Zacatecan affiliate, the Partido Revolucionario Zacatecano or PRZ. Resisting absorption, many local CROM sindicatos as well independent labor unions resisted the PNR-PRZ for years. One SEP inspector commented that in Zacatecas the Partido Nacional Revolucionario “certainly was Nationalist, but had nothing revolutionary.”⁸ As the cases of Morelos and Zacatecas suggest, a new, more sophisticated history of the CROM and of its relationships with the peasantry and smallholders on one hand, and federal and regional politicians, on the other,

intended fraccionamientos to be worked individually with the aim of creating a class of smallholders—he explicitly rejected the ejido as a backwards colonial concept. Most sources say the land was worked individually, but there were some exceptional cases in which the land was worked collectively. Miguel Moctezuma Longoria, “La otra reforma agraria en Zacatecas (1917-1934),” in Efraín Arteaga Domínguez et al., *Temas de Historia, Sociedad, Política y Cultura en Zacatecas* (Zacatecas, 1998), 73-94.

⁴ José de Jesús Montoya Briones, *Jerez y Su Gente: Región de vírgenes, nomadismo y resistencia cultural* (Mexico City: INAH and Plaza y Valdés Editores) 34-35.

⁵ López Ruiz and Sotelo Belmontes “Los agitados años.” Zacatecas’s CROM claimed 70,000 members, the largest number per capita of any state in Mexico, and was exceeded in numbers only by Veracruz’s and the Distrito Federal’s. It reportedly had 187 *sindicatos* for *agricultores* and *campesinos*.

⁶ Luis L. León, *Crónica del poder: recuerdos de un político en el México revolucionario* (Mexico City, 1987), 333.

⁷ There are numerous accounts of conflicts within the “revolutionary family” after Obregón’s death. See for instance, Rafael Loyola Díaz, *La crisis Obregón-Calles y el estado mexicano*, 4th ed. (Mexico City: Siglo Veintiuno, 1991) 120-122.

⁸ AHSEP, DEF ZAC, caja 79, exp. 43, Isidro López Ortíz to DEF, 16 Apr. 1932. I explore the complex dynamics of regional politics in Zacatecas in “Military and Paramilitary in Postrevolutionary Zacatecas, 1915-1940, presented at the Latin American Studies Association XXX International Congress, San Francisco, May 26, 2012.

is needed if we are better to understand postrevolutionary Mexico state formation. And agrarian reform is a crucial part of that story.

III

Another important theme in Mexico in Transition concerns popular rejection of postrevolutionary agrarian reform projects in the 1920s and 1930s. Several chapters, above all those of Stauffer (though more concerned with the historical origins of that failure), Eiss, and Butler, deal with this topic. The reasons for such antagonism towards land reform—respectively ethnic identity, collective memory, and moral economy for Stauffer’s Michoacán, Eiss’s Yucatán, and Butler’s Tlaxcala—are particularly deserving of further reflection and more comparative research. In my last book (*Religion and State Formation in Revolutionary Mexico*, Durham, 2013), I dealt with four states, including, Guanajuato. The cardenista agrarian reform, concentrated in northern Guanajuato, a hotbed of the Second Cristiada, was a resounding failure. Poor planning, institutional corruption, and arid soil all played a role, but, unlike the cases mentioned in Mexico in Transition, Catholic resistance was the principal obstacle. Results were so poor that ejidatarios had to be brought in from Jalisco and Michoacán to repopulate ejidos after grantees went back to work as peons or sharecroppers on neighboring haciendas. Though we do find a handful of exceptionally successful ejidos in Guanajuato, generally agrarian reform in the 1920s and (especially) the 1930s was a failure.

If religion could doom agrarismo, what did the handful of successful ejidos in Guanajuato have in common that others did not? First, they predated the cardenista reforms—they were founded between 1917 and 1927. In fact, during the armed phase, a few guanajuatenese agrarian leaders did join the zapatistas, and survived to rise to leadership roles in the 1920s and 1930s.⁹ Second, successful ejidos received a fair level of consistent support from the state, and federal engineers and teachers appear not to have meddled much in internal affairs. Third, the ejidatarios themselves embraced agrarian reform (although there were intra-communal splits), as well as anticlericalism and state schooling. Fourth—though this is more speculative—these ejidatarios likely had an agrarian history that stretched back to the armed phase of the revolution and perhaps earlier. Fifth, although this is very difficult to determine from sketchy evidence, indigeneity was a factor in some, as Preciado’s chapter finds in Colima: in Guanajuato, both Irámucio (Acámbaro municipio) and a few other ejidos were identified as indigenous or were so in the relatively recent past.

Rodríguez Ramírez’s account of agrarismo in Guanajuato, based mainly on oral history with aged agrarian leaders who were eventually active in the CNC, notes two other factors. In southern Guanajuato, agrarista leaders were minifundistas like the cromistas in Zacatecas. Second, agrarista communities were more educated and literate than others because of historically close ties to teachers, who often had opened schools that taught

⁹ Eliseo Rodríguez Ramírez, “El agrarismo en Guanajuato,” in Julián Rodríguez Sesma (ed.), *Historia de las ligas de comunidades agrarias y sindicatos campesinos: primer concurso estatal. Vol. 2. Centro (Mexico City, 1988)* 104, 106, 127.

peons and sharecroppers. This helped to undermine the influence of the hacienda administrators (and other conservative actors) in rural communities.¹⁰

Guanajuato's few success stories also suggest a few reasons as to why, generally speaking, in many parts of Mexico, Calles's quite limited agrarian reform fared better than Cárdenas's much more ambitious one, even though Cárdenas's grants transferred much more land to many more ejidatarios. How should we explain this range of outcomes?

First, as I have suggested earlier, Cárdenas was trying to do too much in too many places at the same time, and he ultimately prioritized other parts of his project over agrarian reform in most of Mexico, and put the Laguna ahead of most of the other large agrarian projects. Cárdenas preferred to invest in nationalizing oil rather than capitalizing the henequen zone of Yucatán, for instance. Of the 205 million pesos spent by the Agrarian bureaucracy from 1936 to 1938 and in 1940, 99 million went to Laguna and only 17 million to Yucatán.¹¹

Second, many of Cárdenas's pharonic projects were hastily drafted and based on limited knowledge and unrealistic assumptions, as I documented in the henequen zone in Yucatan.¹² Third, as Alan Knight points out, there was a big difference between primary reforms made after years of struggle and drafted in response to demands from the bottom up, seen in the history of Irámucó's ejido, and the massive secondary reforms that were hastily executed by cardenista bureaucrats from the top-down. Knight argues that primary mobilizations were much more transformative and successful than the latter.¹³ As Matthew Butler puts it in his chapter on Buenavista, "there was no popular agrarian movement until the ejidal process itself created one" (p. 448). Sadly, it wasn't just in Tlaxcala that secondary reforms fizzled.

Fourth, very much related to those first two points—and I think Butler raises this issue in his chapter as well—is the fact that the triumphalist discourse of agrarian reform spun by the cardenista state and accepted by many historians at face value really obscures how messy and conflictive the process of agrarian reform was, both during the primary reforms in the armed phase of the Revolution and under the Sonoran Dynasty from 1920 to 1934 (this is a point that Salinas and Stauffer make). Here I want to turn to Eyler Simpson's 1937 classic, *The Ejido: Mexico's Way Out*, which was based on privileged access to federal agrarian records that ran up until the end of 1933. Now, there are methodological problems with Simpson, who changed the names of his case studies to protect actors' identity and who was looking at agrarian problems mainly from the perspective of agrarian bureaucrats. Of course, Simpson also didn't have the documentary

¹⁰ Rodríguez Ramírez, "El agrarismo en Guanajuato," 107.

¹¹ Ben Fallaw, *Cárdenas Compromised: The Failure of Reform in Yucatán* (Durham, 2001), 161-162. The statistic on spending for 1937-1940 period is from Saul Escobar Toledo, "El Cardenismo más allá del reparto: Acciones y resultados," in Everardo Escárcega López and Sául Escobar Toledo (eds.), *Historia de la cuestión agraria mexicana, vol. 5, El Cardenismo: Un parteaguas histórico en el proceso agrario (Primera parte), 1934-1940* (Mexico City, 1991).

¹² Fallaw, *Cárdenas Compromised*, esp. 181-184.

¹³ Alan Knight "The End of the Mexican Revolution?: From Cárdenas to Avila Camacho, 1937-1941," in Paul Gillingham and Benjamin Smith (eds.), *Dictablanda: Politics, Work and Culture in Mexico, 1938-68* (Durham, 2014), 57.

or ethnographic evidence that historians and anthropologists have today. But his book does have a broad and rich if flawed empirical base.

Simpson, summarizing reports on “political organization and social control” filed by the National Agrarian Commission’s agents during 1933, explained that ejidos were beset by the following ills: “elections and political intrigue”; “juggling of ejido parcels” so that land grants were insecure; “refusal to pay taxes and to contribute to the cooperative fund”; “a maladministration of ejido funds”; “plain and fancy politics and general ‘cussedness.’”¹⁴ To make matters worse, agrarian legislation, especially tax laws, were vaguely written, ambiguously implemented, and—in the case of fiscal law in particular—simply ignored for years on end. This created confusion and opportunities for corruption and manipulation, and meant that the federal agrarian bureaucracy was chronically underfunded because it could not collect the taxes and fees needed to sustain it.¹⁵ Moreover, the National Agrarian Commission’s field agents were responsible for supervising an average of 41.6 ejidos each, far too many given the tremendous difficulties they faced.¹⁶ Worse still, agrarian officials lacked discretionary authority due to a highly centralized administrative structure.¹⁷ These internal problems in the federal agrarian bureaucracy were exacerbated by political forces working on the outside against it: hacendados, mayors, congressmen, governors, and generals all meddled in agrarian disputes and patronized factions in intra-ejido conflicts, although Simpson notes that these conflicts often did allow a degree of peasant agency and even roughly democratic outcomes to emerge.¹⁸ Cárdenas’s rapid expansion of the responsibilities of the federal agrarian bureaucracy would almost certainly have worsened these serious problems Simpson identifies.

IV

Butler and Escobar Ohmstede argue in their introduction that Calles was fond of reading the ejido’s last rites, and that the Sonorans used agrarian reform as a political instrument. I think, however, that both these claims require some contextualization. The case of Suchtitlán that Preciado studies and the case of Zacatecas’s cromista agraristas show the military worth of the recipients of land grants, but they also suggest that Calles did see (certain types of) agrarian reform as useful due to their social and political impact even as he issued “stop orders” in 1930 and 1931 to spare large, often export-oriented estates. The Zacatecan parcelario with his rifle in his hand symbolized the virtues that Calles celebrated as revolutionary. As Matthew Butler has shown in his article “The Church in ‘Red Mexico,’” callismo exalted the (putative) economic, social cultural values of the individual small-holder over the ejido and the hacienda, especially his materialist, secular nationalism as opposed to regional, Catholic traditionalism.¹⁹

¹⁴ Eyer N. Simpson, *The Ejido: Mexico’s Way Out* (Chapel Hill, 1937), 335-339.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 343-344.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 344-345.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 346-348.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 348-351.

¹⁹ Matthew Butler, “The Church in ‘Red Mexico’: Michoacán Catholics and the Mexican Revolution, 1920-1929,” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 55, no. 3 (2004): 520-541.