



**Elisa Servín, Leticia Reina, John Tutino, eds.** *Cycles of Conflict, Centuries of Change: Crisis, Reform, and Revolution in Mexico.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2007. xvi + 405 pp. \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8223-4002-7.



**Reviewed by** Timothy J. Henderson (Auburn University Montgomery)

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## Mexico's Revolutionary Past as Prelude

According to its coeditor John Tutino, this book began in 1998 when Leticia Reina and Elisa Servín proposed assembling several heavy hitters in the field of Mexican studies to review the epic crises of Mexico's past—the independence struggle from 1810 to 1821 and the revolution a century later—with the goal of taking lessons from those episodes that might be useful in the present. This seemed an especially good idea as the centenary and bicentenary of those struggles loomed. Lurking in the book's background, and occasionally stated explicitly, is the question of whether a similar crisis might be in store for 2010. The year 2010 has now come and gone without a massive civil war, so at least one of the book's implied questions can be put definitively to rest. Nevertheless, many aspects of Mexico's current reality are hardly cheery: a hideous wave of violence linked to drug trafficking; a political system that, despite its newly democratic character, seems unwilling or unable to tackle ongoing problems of inequality, injustice, and corruption; and an apparently unalterable allegiance to a neoliberal economic model that has so far increased

inequality and unemployment, delivered on few of its promises, and driven more Mexicans than ever north of the border. Mexico may have dodged a crisis in 2010, if one understands crisis to mean a violent turning point that sets the country onto a fundamentally new path. But if we take crisis to mean a time of great difficulty and adversity then it is safe to say that Mexico's crisis has been prolonged, and it is ongoing. A look at how Mexico reached this situation is potentially a very useful exercise.

By their own account, the editors took a laissez-faire approach to assembling the volume, allowing their contributors to handle their tasks as they saw fit. One wishes that the editors had used a heavier hand, as these essays give the reader little sense that the contributors are engaged in a genuine dialogue or collaborative enterprise. The questions that animate the volume are vague enough that many authors apparently felt free to ignore them, often producing interesting and important essays, but essays that fail to highlight areas of agreement or difference with the interpretations of other authors, or to suggest

meaningful applicability of past to present. Some have contributed essays that are essentially shorter versions of the authors' larger works. Worse, the book contains no small amount of redundancy, as author after author recounts the same events—for the most part, events that will already be familiar to most of the volume's readers (as the book will likely have little appeal outside Mexicanist circles). Redundancy is an especially severe problem in the essays dealing with the twentieth century and beyond. Most of the authors have nothing particularly novel to add to the conventional historiographical wisdom regarding, say, the rise and fall of Porfirio Díaz, the creation of the one-party state, or the decline of that one-party state along with the rise of civil society and the onslaught of neoliberalism. It is tedious to have to read so many, and such similar, accounts of these events. In short, readers might have been grateful had the editors made their central questions sharper and encouraged their contributors to be pithier.

Nevertheless, the book has its rewards. The terms that seem to be most central to the volume are liberalism, nationalism, and democracy. Eric Van Young, Antonio Annino, Reina, and François-Xavier Guerra all consider the tensions created by the three fundamentally incompatible political cultures that inhabited Mexico in the nineteenth century: the indigenous pueblos, who hewed to a corporatist ethos; conservative elites, who endorsed corporatism yet tended to disdain nonwhites and nonelites; and liberals, who celebrated individualism and regional autonomy, and aimed to destroy corporatism and the entire colonial legacy. Reina's contribution is particularly interesting, for it argues that, contrary to a widely held impression, political life at the village level during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was vigorous and significant. Indigenous peoples participated enthusiastically in the local and municipal elections mandated by the 1812 Constitution of Cádiz, and those regions where votes were respected saw little violence during the independence decade. Local elections during the Porfiriato witnessed a similar vibrancy. Reina makes the case that, instead of dismissing elections of those eras as fraudulent and therefore unworthy of study, fraudulent elections and the conflicts they engendered can reveal key truths about the fundamental relationships between power and society (p. 95). Reina notes that in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, Mexico has witnessed yet another renewal of electoral enthusiasm.

The most sweeping synthesis of the three periods in question is provided by Alan Knight, who begins his es-

say with a bit of clever redundancy, crafting verbatim identical paragraphs to describe the situations preceding independence and the revolution, then expounding on the real similarities and the important differences in the two periods (i.e., the crisis of 1910 was sparked by entirely internal factors, and it brought about not only political change, but also important changes in class relations). Knight then carries out a socioeconomic review of the subsequent decades of state-led development and neoliberalism, concluding, as do several other authors, that Mexico's present is uncertain and tense, but not revolutionary.

Tutino contributes one of the more provocative pieces in the book. Tutino argues that the revolutions of 1810 and 1910 were essentially rural outbursts, and they would not have been possible had rural communities not retained a large measure of what he calls "ecological autonomies." By this he means that rural communities still comprised a substantial majority of Mexico's population, and that they had access to food and other resources that gave them the self-sufficiency necessary to sustain a prolonged upheaval. Tutino goes into great (and I would say, given his fundamental purpose, excessive) detail in assessing degrees of "ecological autonomy" in different regions at different times. Since the 1970s, Mexico has ceased being a predominantly rural nation and those who remain in the countryside have definitively lost their "ecological autonomies," rendering them impotent as a revolutionary force. Tutino suggests that perhaps the Vietnam War witnessed the world's last genuine rural insurgency, and henceforth the exploited peoples of the world have had to rely, at best, on the ballot box for redress of grievances.

Among the authors represented in this book, Tutino is by far the most pessimistic in his assessment of the achievements and potential of Mexico's emergent democracy. Curiously, Tutino seems positively nostalgic for the age of bloody and chaotic revolutions, for "democracy without ecological autonomies is limited" (p. 256). Yet while it is certainly true that elections provide an imperfect mechanism for marginalized peoples to express their grievances—that they are indeed "limited"—the same can be said of revolutions. Revolutions certainly allowed exploited rural peoples ample opportunity to assert themselves on their own terms, but they also witnessed vicious internecine fighting among the poor and ultimately delivered only limited and fleeting improvements in their lives, while causing immense suffering. As Enrique Semo points out in his essay on the Mexican Left, utopian ideas that will settle for nothing less

than worldly perfection are dangerous; those that claim the possibility not of a perfect world but of a better one are necessary (p. 360). While no sane person would view Mexico's democracy—or any democracy, for that matter—as a panacea, to analyze its imperfections and work for improvement seems at least as fruitful a route to betterment as violent revolution.

And that is precisely what some of the best essays in the book do. The last several essays deal with the contemporary crisis, and for the most part they provide judicious assessments of current realities. Especially useful is Guillermo de la Peña's nearly encyclopedic review of popular resistance groups in modern Mexico, ranging from Sinarquistas and dissident peasants and railway workers in the 1940s and 1950s; to dissident labor organizations, squatters' rights groups, and Christian base communities in the 1960s to the 1980s; to the explosion

of civil society in more recent decades. He offers a relatively sanguine assessment of the importance of such groups, arguing that they have created a new sense of community and new ways of bringing attention to communal demands that do not exclude anybody and are, at the same time, compatible with modernity (p. 337).

Serván has the last word. After offering yet another review of Mexico's modern history, Serván concludes that Mexico continues to contend with enclaves of modernity, enduring sectors clinging to old powers and corporate ways, and emerging groups creating hybrid forms of communal modernity—each with different goals, expectations, and demands.... The imagined possibility of a more just and equal path for all Mexicans demands attention, discussion, and debate (p. 388). While overlong, redundant, and at times unfocused, this book is a valuable contribution toward that end.

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