

DIVERSE APPROACHES
TO NINETEENTH-CENTURY
MEXICAN HISTORY

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RITUALS OF RULE, RITUALS OF RESISTANCE: PUBLIC CELEBRATIONS AND POPULAR CULTURE IN MEXICO. By William H. Beezley, Cheryl English Martin, and William E. French. (Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources, 1994. Pp. 374. \$55.00 cloth, \$17.95 paper.)

THE CENTRAL REPUBLIC IN MEXICO, 1835–1846: HOMBRES DE BIEN IN THE AGE OF SANTA ANNA. By Michael P. Costeloe. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993. Pp. 324. \$59.95 cloth.)

A PEACEFUL AND WORKING PEOPLE: MANNERS, MORALS, AND CLASS FORMATION IN NORTHERN MEXICO. By William E. French. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996. Pp. 292. \$40.00 cloth.)

LA TRADICION REPUBLICANA DEL BUEN GOBIERNO. By Alicia Hernández Chávez. (Mexico City: Colegio de México, 1993. Pp. 224.)

MAXIMILIAN'S LIEUTENANT: A PERSONAL HISTORY OF THE MEXICAN CAMPAIGN, 1864–1867. Translated and edited by Gordon Etherington-Smith, introduction by Don M. Coerver. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1994. Pp. 201. \$39.95 cloth.)

Although different in style and substance, the five works to be discussed here share some of the same themes. Each has something to say about the nature of politics, the state, and national development in nineteenth-century Mexico. Each touches to some extent on the theme of social change. Two of the volumes delve into cultural history, a relatively new subfield to Latin Americanists, and include analyses of class and gender. All five demonstrate the continuing variety and depth of scholarship on Mexico's "long nineteenth century," which includes the last decades of Bourbon rule through the first decade of the Mexican Revolution (1790–1920).

The popular image of Mexico during the years between independence in 1821 and the rise to power of Porfirio Díaz in 1876 is that of a

The author would like to thank Pedro Santoni, "a real Mexicanist," for helping select two of the books for this review essay.

country on the brink of disaster because of its failure to establish stable and meaningful institutions of government. Alicia Hernández Chávez challenges this image in *La tradición republicana del buen gobierno*. A professor at the Colegio de México and the author of a well-received study of Anenencuilco (the hometown of Emiliano Zapata), Hernández is also the general editor of the Colegio's *Historia de las Américas* series in which *La tradición republicana* appears. As a synthesis of some of the most recent scholarship, her book sweeps through nineteenth-century Mexican political history in order to reinterpret it in a more positive light. Hernández asserts that despite all the country's political trials and tribulations (including two major foreign invasions that go virtually unmentioned in her book), Mexicans did something right: they gradually but firmly embraced the idea that *el buen gobierno* ("good government") is representative and built on liberal republican principles.

Hernández demonstrates this point by subordinating discussion of specific events and persons to an analysis of broad trends that in her view reflected the emergence of a popular political culture based on such principles. As she argues in the first chapter, the basic ideas underlying representative government, such as the concepts of citizenry and popular sovereignty, can be traced back to developments in the late colonial period, particularly the impact of eighteenth-century *composiciones de tierra* (certifications of occupancy rights). By granting new mestizo communities legal rights over local water, woodlands, and land, these *composiciones de tierra* helped pave the way, according to Hernández, for the movement toward municipal autonomy (particularly claims of popular sovereignty) that marked the dawn of Mexican independence between 1808 and 1812. In short, their experiences first as "*vecinos*" of a town and later as members of an *ayuntamiento* prepared Mexicans to become citizens of a republic by the mid-1820s.

The next two chapters of *La tradición republicana del buen gobierno* follow the rise and decline of a popular liberalism that Hernández finds rooted in this tradition of municipal self-government. She refers frequently to the role of the Guardias Nacionales, civilian militias that formed in the 1840s to defend Mexico from the invading United States. In her view, these militias symbolized the defense of popular rights. Yet Hernández provides frustratingly little historical detail on the Guardias—who they were, what they did, and when. Hernández perceives Mexican Liberalism, especially the era from La Reforma to La República Restaurada, as a "revolution," a powerful social movement that helped spread republican ideas throughout the country during the 1850s and 1860s. Yet again, aside from some discussion of the impact of the Ley Lerdo on large and small property holding, she leaves readers wondering what popular liberalism and republicanism looked like. Perhaps one must read her earlier study of Anenencuilco or else the specific case studies of Florencia Mallon,

whose recent *Peasant and Nation* portrays liberalism as a confluence of distinct currents, each with its own regional, class, and ethnic dimensions. Like Mallon, Hernández views the Porfiriato as an era in which popular elements hunkered down in response to a powerful centralizing state whose ability to co-opt regional elites and power brokers (and to attract foreign capital) reduced the voices as well as the status of local communities and their representatives. She also demonstrates how thermidorian trends such as the further spread of indirect voting procedures among the states and the rise of Díaz's dictatorship pushed the Mexican people off the political center stage, leaving them to simmer in the wings amidst memories of the Constitution of 1857.

In her last and longest chapter, Hernández provides a thorough survey of the Mexican Revolution, incorporating much of the research of the last ten years and advancing the idea that the revolution was "a new awakening" that revived and extended the country's popular liberal tradition. She sees the revolution's chief accomplishments as its restoration of legality and creation of a new constitution. That document adapted liberalism to a changed society by laying the basis for a "cooperative federalism" that restored some balance to the relationship between ordinary citizens and elites, credibility to the central government, and "governability" above all. Hernández readily admits at the outset that she hopes to help Mexicans (meaning nonacademics) understand better the historical roots of their civic culture as well as the nature of problems within their current political system. Her effort to do so is admirable because *La tradición republicana*, whatever its weaknesses, provides a thoughtful assessment of the extent to which liberal republican values became part of Mexico's national heritage. This accomplishment should make it of interest to nonspecialists as well as scholars.

In contrast to Hernández's broad interpretive work, Michael Costeloe's *The Central Republic of Mexico, 1835–1846: Hombres de Bien and the Age of Santa Anna* is a tightly woven empirical study of events and personages during the decade of Mexico's first experiment with centralist-style government. The author of three previous monographs on nineteenth-century Mexico, Costeloe investigates closely the rise and fall of centralism. His latest book seeks to answer the simple question of why the centralists failed, that is, why they fell short of their goal of establishing a stable political order for Mexico. It strongly suggests that failure stemmed from the behavior of the centralists themselves, or rather the social group they apparently represented, the middle-class "*hombres de bien*" (honorable men). Costeloe characterizes the *hombres de bien* (that is, most of the centralists) as political moderates who had become convinced of the need for a strong centralized government to stave off what they viewed as Mexico's main problem, an impending collapse of the social order that imperiled their own status as respectable men. Yet in

Costeloe's account, his protagonists always seem to be waiting around for someone else—like the ubiquitous Antonio López de Santa Anna—to come along and give them their cue. Costeloe explains that despite their common values, centralist leaders often were bitterly divided on personal grounds. Aided by his study of at least twenty-three sets of private letters and papers (mostly in the Genaro García Manuscript Collection at the University of Texas), he closely scrutinizes the roles and behavior of major figures, including Santa Anna. Indeed, his evenhanded characterization of Santa Anna as a consummate dealmaker helps explain the caudillo's perennial popularity among his peers, reminding readers of the genuine impact of personalities on politics. Costeloe demonstrates that Santa Anna's influence was both cause and effect of the lack of effective unity among the *hombres de bien*, a situation that in turn helped undermine the centralist project and pave the way for the Mexican-American War in 1846.

The Central Republic of Mexico also confirms the validity of Hernández's idea that Mexico's nineteenth-century political experience involved more than failure and disaster. Costeloe points out the fact that throughout the centralist decade, Mexican legislatures consistently (and often bravely) refused to be cowed permanently by caudillos seeking to impose their will. Time and again, legislators regrouped, reasserted themselves, and reclaimed their legitimate authority as representatives of the nation. Costeloe implies that even though their efforts were not always successful, legislators' refusal to give in completely to military bullying created a positive legacy of commitment to republican government that outlasted the centralist decade. In sum, the contrasting studies by Hernández and Costeloe complement each other in their common effort to cast new and empathetic light on the nature of politics in nineteenth-century Mexico.

Another aspect of Mexico's nineteenth-century experience, the French Intervention, is the focus of selected materials from Ernst Pitner's diary and letters, recently published under the title *Maximilian's Lieutenant: A Personal History of the Mexican Campaign, 1864–1867*. The diary entries and letters offer a view of mid-nineteenth-century events from the perspective of a young Austrian officer in Emperor Maximilian's army. Edited and translated by Gordon Etherington-Smith (a British descendant of Pitner's), they form a lively account of the vicissitudes of soldiering in a foreign country. Although this account focuses on the activities of Pitner and other Europeans, it also reveals the author's keen observations of Mexicans and Mexican conditions of the time. Perhaps because of his youth, Ernst Pitner seems to have been free of some of the extreme prejudices that often characterized the writings of foreign travelers in Mexico. Thus his comments should be of value to Mexicanists, especially social historians interested in the French period (still few in number, I suspect).

These remarks include vivid observations on local conditions, among them, the cool attitude of Veracruzanos toward all foreigners in 1864, the difficulty and dangers of traveling in the Mexican interior, the inconveniences caused by periodic flooding in Mexico City, and the freewheeling life around the border town of Matamoros, where the long-suffering Austrians were stationed for several months. Pitner also provided insights on the “underside” of the imperialist venture, such as the conflicts between French military authorities and the Austrians as well as between the French and the Mexicans, the mixed motives of those involved in the intervention, and the sheer physical difficulty of conquering a country whose people were determined to resist the invaders. *Maximilian's Lieutenant* is enriched by the historical commentary of Don Coerver and editor Etherington-Smith, who prefaces each section of documents with a summary of the events and circumstances alluded to in it. As a primary source, this volume should help historians to go beyond interpretations of the French period that stress the roles of only a few men—mainly Benito Juárez and Maximilian—at the expense of many others also embroiled in this crucial phase of Mexico's evolution.

The last two books to be examined exemplify newer trends in the historical scholarship on Latin America and on nineteenth-century Mexico specifically. *Rituals of Rule, Rituals of Resistance: Public Celebrations and Popular Culture in Mexico*, edited by William Beezley, Cheryl English Martin, and William French, offers a collection of essays by sixteen scholars who have blazed a trail into the relatively new territory of Latin American cultural history, particularly into the history of Mexican popular culture. The essays as a whole reflect the influence of anthropological concepts as well as studies conducted since the early 1980s by cultural historians of Europe and the United States (such as Lynn Hunt's work on the French Revolution). They broach a wide range of topics: popular religious celebrations, the delightful subject of street songs and dance, work and labor conditions, the notion of public space and its use, educational reform, civic festivals, and village bands. The essays (all based on primary research) also span the history of Mexico since colonial times. The five dealing with the nineteenth century proper suggest the rich possibilities of cultural history as a genre. Barbara Tenenbaum's “Street-wise History: The Paseo de la Reforma and the Porfirian State, 1876–1910” provides a fascinating glimpse into the way in which urban space reflected the influence of certain aesthetic ideals combined with the Porfiriato's smug reconstruction of Mexico's past, as exemplified in the arrangement and design of the monuments along the Paseo. Eric Van Young's concluding essay, “The State as Vampire: Hegemonic Projects, Public Ritual, and Popular Culture in Mexico, 1600–1990,” does a masterly job of teasing out common themes from the previous essays and uniting them into a call for connecting the study of ritual to larger pro-

cesses in Mexican history. Van Young warns specifically against the perils of a cultural history in which the focus on decoding rituals tends to detach it from these processes and thus neglect the influence of basic historical factors like geography and ethnicity. He also suggests that future cultural analysis be tied to the mega-theme of the growth of state power and to what he refers to as the ongoing "dialogue between the Mexican state and the Mexican people" over control of different forms of human expression.

William French's *A Peaceful and Working People: Manners, Morals, and Class Formation in Northern Mexico* addresses this historical dialogue to some degree by exploring the way in which state and mining company officials, along with a self-conscious middle class, interacted with an emerging working class in Chihuahua during the Porfiriato. The book is an innovative and sophisticated study of the various elements involved in the making of a capitalist culture that included mineworkers as well as mineowners, politicians, and middle-class reformers. French shows how mineworkers adopted much of the same developmentalist ideology ("Order and Progress") fostered by the Porfirian regime and members of Chihuahua's moralizing "*sociedad culta*." His emphasis on the noneconomic factors involved in forming a modern working-class identity—on manners and morals—no doubt charts a new direction for studies of labor in late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Latin America. French's study also reflects the influence of the new cultural history represented in *Rituals of Rule*, for which he served as both co-editor and contributor.

A few concluding comments are in order. With the exception of Costeloe's *The Central Republic in Mexico* and the edited diary and letters of Ernst Pitner, these books show that scholars of nineteenth-century Mexico continue to favor study of the Porfiriato over earlier eras. In *Rituals of Rule*, for example, four of the five essays covering that century deal exclusively with developments during the Porfirian period (although Guy Thompson's long-term study of village bands begins earlier, in 1846). Like French and Hernández, who carry their respective analyses into the first decade of the Mexican Revolution, historians of Mexico are continuing to develop a periodization that privileges social, cultural, and economic developments over political ones, insofar as the latter have been traditionally defined. Finally, the examples of cultural history already discussed reveal a new dimension to be explored further. Beezley, Martin, and French are to be commended for their forays into that dimension. In view of the conceptual and methodological borrowing that such works represent, Florencia Mallon's lament about the "insularity" of much research on nineteenth-century Mexico now seems thankfully a bit less relevant.¹

1. Florencia Mallon, "Beyond Insularity: The Challenge of Nineteenth-Century Mexican History," *LARR* 26, no. 3 (1991):247–56.