

LINKING STATE AND SOCIETY IN
DISCOURSE AND ACTION:
Political and Cultural Studies of the Cárdenas Era
in Mexico*

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- EL CARDENISMO, UNA UTOPIA MEXICANA. By Adolfo Gilly. (Mexico City: Cal y Arena, 1994. Pp. 499.)
- LOS CODIGOS OCULTOS DEL CARDENISMO: UN ESTUDIO DE LA VIOLENCIA POLITICA, EL CAMBIO SOCIAL Y LA CONTINUIDAD INSTITUCIONAL. By Raquel Sosa Elízaga. (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México and Plaza y Valdés, 1996. Pp. 579.)
- PERSPECTIVAS SOBRE EL CARDENISMO: ENSAYOS SOBRE ECONOMIA, TRABAJO, POLITICA Y CULTURA EN LOS AÑOS TREINTA. Edited by Marcos Tonatiuh Aguila M. and Alberto Enríquez Perea. (Mexico City: Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana-Azcapotzalco, 1996. Pp. 359.)
- CARDENISMO, ARGUMENTACION Y ANTAGONISMO EN EDUCACION. By Rosa Nidia Buenfil Burgos. (Mexico City: Departamento de Investigaciones Educativas, CINVESTAV, IPN/CONACYT, 1994. Pp. 326.)
- LAZARO CARDENAS Y SU PROYECTO CULTURAL EN MICHOACAN. By María Teresa Cortés Zavala. (Morelia: Universidad Michoacana de San Nicolás de Hidalgo, 1995. Pp. 256.)
- CULTURAL POLITICS IN REVOLUTION: TEACHERS, PEASANTS, AND SCHOOLS IN MEXICO, 1930-1940. By Mary Kay Vaughan. (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1997. Pp. 262. \$17.95 paper.)
- CASI NADA: A STUDY OF AGRARIAN REFORM IN THE HOMELAND OF CARDENISMO. By John Gledhill. (Albany, N.Y.: Institute for MesoAmerican Studies, distributed by the University of Texas Press, 1991. Pp. 420. \$30.00 paper.)
- LA ADMINISTRACION OBRERA DE LOS FERROCARRILES NACIONALES DE MEXICO. By Gustavo López Pardo. (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México and El Caballito, 1997. Pp. 217.)

*For Daniel Nugent, anthropologist and passionate scholar of Mexico, whose insights into the Mexican state and society form the basis of our own.

MUJERES QUE SE ORGANIZAN: EL FRENTE UNICO PRO DERECHOS DE LA MUJER, 1935–1938. By Esperanza Tuñón Pablos. (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México and Miguel Angel Porrúa, 1992. Pp. 173.)

On 6 July 1997, Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, founder and leader of the Mexican Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD), scored an impressive victory in being elected mayor of Mexico City. Cárdenas's new status as leader of the world's largest city, along with the PRD's substantial gains in parliamentary elections, has raised important questions about the sources of their combined political strength. To what is owed the victory of Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas and his party? At least three answers suggest themselves: the particular political talents, programs, and bases of support developed by Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas; the identification of his father, former President Lázaro Cárdenas (1934–1940), with the zenith of a popular revolutionary project; and the exhaustion of the corporatist political model that, perhaps ironically and unwittingly, Lázaro Cárdenas bequeathed to the Mexican state. All these elements contributed in some measure to the recent victory, but it is not our intention to sort them out here. Instead, we would like to explore the evidence that the popular legacy of the Lázaro Cárdenas era has provided significant support for his son and the PRD.¹

Mexicans clearly have been searching for an alternate unifying national project that could serve as a counterweight to the polarizing and fragmenting effects of recent neoliberal hegemony. This search, along with the increasing popularity of Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas and his party, has spawned new interest in the roots of the political-symbolic phenomenon now known as Cardenismo. It thus comes as no surprise that historians and social scientists have turned their attention to assessing the project that Lázaro Cárdenas attempted to carry forth. Happily, this attention has coincided with and been given impetus by the national celebration in 1995 of the centenary of Lázaro Cárdenas's birth. Implicit in this mushrooming of works on Cardenismo is a concern with how the Mexican political model evolved as well as with whether and how the experience of Cardenismo can throw light on the path out of the present political-economic morass, not only in Mexico but in the rest of Latin America.

The variety of works to be considered here attend to each of the major sectors and processes of the unique Cardenista project of state formation. By exploring these facets of the project in some detail, the books advance considerably scholarly knowledge of how the relationship between the Mexican state and society was constructed in that era. They also provide important theoretical and methodological cues and miscues for exploring Cardenismo as a complex political phenomenon: a congerie of

1. *Cartas a Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas*, edited by Adolfo Gilly (Mexico City: Era, 1989).

practices and beliefs that developed at a particular historical juncture and then ramified into many social spaces, from the elite halls of policy formation and political campaigning to the quotidian reproduction of peasant modes of livelihood.

Revisiting the Modus of Cardenismo

Several of the books under review challenge the “revisionist views” that the Cardenista project was an imposition “from above,” always intended to sacrifice popular empowerment for an increase in state power.² In doing so, however, these works do not entirely reinstate the hagiographic line of earlier works that viewed Cárdenas as a beleaguered hero of the popular will.³ The work by Mary Kay Vaughan, for instance, permits reconstruction with considerable nuance and complexity of the dynamics and constraints that characterized the relationship between the Mexican state and society in the 1930s. In one way or another, the works under consideration invite readers to take up the challenge posed by Gilbert Joseph and Daniel Nugent: to understand how the state is formed through its engagement in everyday forms of rule that involve the negotiation of popular demands and interests.⁴ Such a view, indebted largely to theorists like Antonio Gramsci, Phillip Corrigan, Derek Sayer, and James Scott,⁵ underlines the fundamental ambiguity of nation-state hegemony, the shifting creation of a ruling consensus that may or may not serve to dominate the very groups recruited in its creation. These studies thus urge scholars to reconsider how the “hegemony” achieved by the Cardenista state could be at once a genuine articulation and empowerment of popular demands (a

2. See, for instance, Arturo Anguiano, *El estado y la política obrera del cardenismo* (Mexico City: Era, 1975); Arnoldo Córdova, *La política de masas del cardenismo* (Mexico City: Era, 1975); Nora Hamilton, *The Limits of State Autonomy: Post-Revolutionary Mexico* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1982); and Marjorie Becker, *Setting the Virgin on Fire: Lázaro Cárdenas, Michoacán Peasants, and the Redemption of the Mexican Revolution* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995). For more on revisionist literature dealing with the Cárdenas era, see Alan Knight, “Cardenismo: Juggernaut or Jalopy?” *Journal of Latin American Studies* 26, pt. 1 (Feb. 1994):73–107.

3. Frank Tannenbaum, *Mexico: The Struggle for Peace and Bread* (New York: Knopf, 1950); William Cameron Townsend, *Lázaro Cárdenas, Mexican Democrat* (Wahr, 1952); and Fernando Benítez, *Lázaro Cárdenas y la Revolución Mexicana* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1978).

4. See *Everyday Forms of State Formation: Revolution and the Negotiation of Rule in Modern Mexico*, edited by Gilbert Joseph and Daniel Nugent (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1994).

5. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from The Prison Notebooks*, edited and translated by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (New York: International Books, 1971); Phillip Corrigan and Derek Sayer, *The Great Arch: English State Formation as Cultural Revolution* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985); and James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1985).

more “democratic” form of politics) as well as a political form and discourse that would later sustain regimes far less responsive to such popular demands.

Adolfo Gilly, long known for his iconoclastic treatment of the Mexican Revolution, provides in *El cardenismo, una utopía mexicana* an ingenious reconstruction of Cárdenas’s decision in 1938 to expropriate foreign oil companies in Mexico. Gilly uses the detailed documentation of this fateful decision as a lens for examining the interplay between Cárdenas’s perception of his own role as the representative of the Mexican people and the objective national and international circumstances that he faced. Such an approach ultimately leads Gilly to emphasize the convergence between Cárdenas’s ideas, his “*imaginario*” of the Mexican nation and people, and the people’s actual needs.

How does Gilly demonstrate this convergence? First, he does not attempt to encompass his subject matter fully. He presents instead a distilled picture of the man, his ideas, and his time. In focused fashion, Gilly sets Cárdenas’s idiosyncrasies against those of U.S. political leaders of the 1930s, thus highlighting the contrasts between a society whose ethos is allegedly to defend the collectivity and a society that has traditionally privileged the rights of the individual.

Gilly’s reading of Cárdenas’s speeches and notes emphasizes the importance of the Revolutionary Constitution of 1917 in Cárdenas’s thinking. In his mind, this constitution provided a warrant for Mexico’s material wealth to benefit the collectivity, the people as a whole. Gilly also reminds readers that Cárdenas, as chief of regional military operations in the 1920s, had first-hand knowledge of the living and working conditions in many of the most important oil fields. He became convinced that only expropriation would guarantee a higher standard of living for such workers and more just recompense for the Mexican people. Thus the question was not whether to expropriate but when. The year 1938 became the propitious time for such a move.

The most immediate reason for the decision to expropriate was the arrogant conduct in Mexico of foreign oil companies (mainly British and U.S.), which refused to honor the verdict of the Junta de Conciliación y Arbitraje (the labor arbitration board) to increase workers’ salaries. This stance alone might not have precipitated the decision, however, had not the international context allowed and encouraged it. Gilly’s presentation of Cárdenas’s notes permits readers to appreciate the strategic nature of his thinking. He was well aware of the many indications that war was about to break out. Combined with the threat of Nazi provocations, this situation would deter both England and the United States from intervening in Mexico. This set of circumstances helped Cárdenas mount the necessary resolve to expropriate.

Gilly emphasizes that the expropriation was an act of courage and

hope in which Cárdenas abjured cabinet approval, trusting his instincts that the Mexican people would recognize in it their own dignification. Thus Gilly's contribution to scholarly understanding of this well-explored subject is to allow readers to look anew at the ways in which Cárdenas fortified the relationship between the Mexican state and society. The relationship was consolidated not through a balancing act, as his predecessors had done, but as a project through which the perennially underprivileged gained access, in principle if not in substance, to the privileges that the capitalist system on the periphery had been denying them. The expropriation allowed Cárdenas to rectify this situation, and in doing so, he rendered himself the public embodiment of national dignity and the personification of the people's will.

Traditionally, Cárdenas has been portrayed as a "man of the people," traversing the country incessantly and listening to their pangs of pain and cries for help. Yet if it is true that he offered solutions to the problems as they were presented to him, he also had a knack for anticipating such problems and proffering solutions unimagined by the petitioners themselves. Indeed, Cárdenas often thought that he knew better than they did. Was this simply a form of populist paternalism, of Cárdenas as father figure, "the compassionate guardian" who acted less like a politician and more like a tutor to the Mexican people? Gilly does not accept this version of Cárdenas.⁶ He views Cárdenas instead as a calculating politician developing strategies as if he were still engaged in battles on the field. Gilly portrays him as such, except that his weapons now differed: this time they were the weapons of the state itself, with all the resources at its disposal. Perhaps more than any other Mexican president, Cárdenas trusted the peasants, Indian and mestizo, because they too identified with the soil, with the traditions. Cárdenas sought to build with them and for them a Mexico that would be kinder and more distributive, healthy, educated, and prosperous. If he often looked over their heads, it was not out of arrogance but because he was aware of powerful forces (the Catholic Church, the *hacendados*, and the *caciques*) that threatened the promise of the Mexican Revolution. According to Gilly, Cárdenas's outlook, his imaginario of what Mexico might become, was ultimately grounded in the nationalist ethos of that revolution. And because he perceived the revolution as an expression of popular demands and aspirations, his own imaginario (serving always as a touchstone for the strategies he needed to develop) effectively sufficed to stand in for such aspirations. This ineffable convergence defines the "Mexican utopia" of Gilly's title.

While Gilly stresses the convergence between the Cardenista imaginario and popular aspirations, between state forms and social demands,

6. See, for instance, Enrique Krauze, "General misionero, Lázaro Cárdenas," in *Biografías del poder: Caudillos de la Revolución Mexicana (1910–1940)* (Mexico City: Tusquets, 1997; first published in 1987).

Raquel Sosa's study centers on the divergence, on the centrifugal forces that seemingly made the Cardenista project impossible to realize. In *Los códigos ocultos del cardenismo: Un estudio de la violencia política, el cambio social y la continuidad institucional*, Sosa portrays the preponderant reality of the period as violence and violent opposition to Cárdenas's project, which effectively ended in 1940. Sosa interprets accordingly the nomination of conservative Manuel Avila Camacho to succeed Cárdenas over radical Cardenista collaborator Francisco Múgica. Rather than risk further violence, Sosa suggests, Cárdenas chose a more conciliatory candidate and thus palliated the forces—*sinarquistas*, rebel generals, and foreign governments—arrayed against his project. For Sosa, Cardenismo was never a unifying political project but one that was always dictated willy-nilly by the imperative of avoiding violence.

Gilly views Cárdenas's widespread and unprecedented agrarian reform as the convergence of his imaginario with peasant aspirations. But Sosa interprets it as an initiative from above, thus following the revisionist historiographical current. Sosa is emphatic in claiming that the agrarian reform was not the result of negotiation with peasant realities but an initiative that from the outset was effected out of political and military strategic considerations (p. 93). In her view, the agrarian reform owed more to rampant violence in the countryside than to Cárdenas's dream of campesino redemption from servitude or his ideas about social justice. Sosa maps the geography of the agrarian reform according to this logic. She does not deny Cárdenas's intention to benefit the collectivity. In her interpretation, the collectivity was primary in the president's mind, but more as the beneficiary of mitigating policies than as the protagonist of change (p. 133).

Even if one recognizes the persistence of various forms of violence during the Cárdenas regime, Sosa clearly exaggerates its extent. For instance, she fails to acknowledge what so many others have found remarkable about Cárdenas: that he was the first postrevolutionary Mexican president who did not use political violence to exterminate his enemies. Sosa pursues the story of violence with great single-mindedness but fails to situate such violence comparatively or structurally. Her book relies almost entirely on primary sources as if they were the fount of truth. Had Sosa taken into account the arguments contained in related secondary works, her vision might have been more nuanced. For instance, had she considered what has been written about the Nazi threat in Mexico in general and in the different regions,⁷ she would have read with more circumspection U.S. military reports about the alleged Nazi infiltration in Mexico. After all, the interest of U.S. Department of State and intelligence establishments in playing up the Nazi threat was to create a sense of emergency in Mexico, a

7. See, for instance, Brígida von Mentz, Verena Radkau, Daniela Spenser, and Ricardo Pérez Montfort, *Los empresarios alemanes: El Tercer Reich y la oposición de derecha a Cárdenas*, 2 vols. (Mexico City: Casa Chata, 1988).

threat to U.S. national security that would require closer cooperation between the two countries once World War II broke out.

Like the two monographs discussed thus far, the volume edited by Marcos Tonatiuh Aguila and Alberto Enríquez Perea attempts to examine Cardenismo from new perspectives. But *Perspectivas sobre el cardenismo: Ensayos sobre economía, trabajo, política y cultura en los años treinta* seeks to present a broader picture of the Cárdenas era. Featuring contributions from a variety of Mexican, U.S., and European scholars, the book resulted from an international seminar that brought many of the essayists together at the Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana in Azcapotzalco in 1992. Several essays were published previously, namely, Enrique Cárdenas's piece on political economy and English Mexicanist Alan Knight's essay on popular culture and the state.⁸ The rest of the contributions derive from works in progress (such as Jeffrey Bortz's essay on labor relations in the textile industry) or reflect on unresolved issues in the existing literature (such as Olivia Gall's observations on Cardenismo and democratic forms of popular representation). The overall intent of the book is one with which we are in accord: to present the double-edged nature of Cárdenas's project as combining political control with nourishing the collectivity as a social actor. Yet because the book's introduction and the essays' conclusions break little new ground, its contribution seems limited to providing more varied *perspectivas* rather than any novel approach or set of conceptual tools.

Breaking New Ground in the Field of Education

No Mexicanist writing about the 1930s can afford to pass over the importance of socialist education, which together with agrarian reform and the oil expropriation formed a key component of the Cardenista project. Formal education has played a prominent role in the history of modern state formation as a crucible for constructing "imagined communities" and hegemonic politico-cultural allegiances.⁹ It is no surprise, then, that the educational field was actively enlisted as part of the Cardenista project of state formation. In fact, the Cárdenas era may be most famous for its experiment in bringing a conception of "socialist education" to local schools

8. Knight's contribution is an abridged version of his 1994 article "Popular Culture and the Revolutionary State in Mexico, 1910–1940," which appeared in the *Hispanic American Historical Review* 74, no. 3:393–444.

9. On nation and state formation more generally, see Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1983); and Corrigan and Sayer, *The Great Arch*. On the state's role in creating subjectivities and allegiances through schooling, see *The Cultural Production of the Educated Person*, edited by Bradley A. Levinson, Douglas Foley, and Dorothy C. Holland (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996); and Martin Carnoy, "Education and the State: From Adam Smith to Perestroika," in *Emergent Issues in Education: Comparative Perspectives*, edited by Robert F. Arno, Philip G. Altbach, and Gail P. Kelly (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992).

and communities. A robust literature already exists documenting the rise of Mexican socialist education as an idea and its subsequent implementation in policy and practice.¹⁰ A more recent body of literature has attempted to chart the manifestations and effects of socialist education in regional societies and cultures.¹¹ New books by Rosa Nidia Buenfil Burgos, María Teresa Cortés Zavala, and Mary Kay Vaughan contribute to this literature by helping formulate a broader and more nuanced picture of socialist education as a complex dialectic between local forces and Cardenista state imperatives.

Buenfil's *Cardenismo, argumentación y antagonismo en educación* elaborates on a doctoral thesis written in the late 1980s under the guidance of Ernesto Laclau, known for his penetrating studies of populism in Argentina and Brazil. An ambitious work, it is ultimately compromised by the failure to ground fully or justify its poststructuralist conceptual framework as well as by a tendency to privilege educational discourse as the crystallization of Cardenismo. Buenfil has nonetheless assembled an interesting array of documentary sources from the Cárdenas era to interrogate the various meanings—"the imaginary construction"—of socialist education as it was played out in rhetorical campaigns and institutional spaces. In accordance with her theoretical premises, Buenfil sets out to deconstruct the discursive manifestations of the "mística de la Revolución Mexicana" in the educational field, to show their contradictions and the possibility of multiple appropriations in practice. Her goal is to provide yet another lens through which to reconstruct the imaginario of the Cardenista project, and in this she largely succeeds.

Drawing on the poststructuralist conception of hegemony as the

10. John Britton, *Educación y radicalismo en México*, 2 vols. (Mexico City: Secretaría de Educación Pública, 1976); Victoria Lerner, *La educación socialista* (Mexico City: Colegio de México, 1979); David Raby, *La educación y revolución social* (Mexico City: Secretaría de Educación Pública, 1976); Eva Taboada, "Educación y lucha ideológica en el México posrevolucionario (1920–1940)," in *Educación y clases populares en América Latina*, edited by María de Ibarrola and Elsie Rockwell (Mexico City: Departamento de Investigaciones Educativas, 1985); and Pablo Yankelevich, *La educación socialista en Jalisco* (Guadalajara, Mex.: Departamento de Educación Pública del Estado de Jalisco, 1985).

11. Marjorie Becker, *Setting the Virgin on Fire*; Adrian Bantjes, *As If Jesus Walked on Earth: Cardenismo, Sonora, and the Mexican Revolution* (Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources, 1998); María del Rosario Rodríguez Díaz, *El suroeste de Michoacán y el problema educativo, 1917–1940* (Morelia, Mex.: Universidad Michoacana, 1984); *Los avatares de una reforma educativa: La educación socialista en el contexto regional*, edited by Susana Quintanilla and Mary Kay Vaughan (Mexico City: Conaculta, 1997); Stephen E. Lewis, "Revolution and the Rural Schoolhouse: Forging State and Nation in Chiapas, 1913–1948," Ph.D. diss., University of California, San Diego, 1997; Susana Quintanilla, "La reforma educativa durante el período presidencial de Lázaro Cárdenas: Balance historiográfico," in *Ideas, valores y tradiciones: Ensayos sobre la historia de la educación en México*, edited by Milada Bazant (Zinacantepec: Colegio Mexiquense, 1996), 183–201; and Salvador Camacho, *Controversia educativa: Entre la ideología y la fe, la educación socialista en Aguascalientes* (Mexico City: Conaculta, 1991).

discursive construction of political subjects, Buenfil takes care to delimit the scope of *Cardenismo, argumentación y antagonismo en educación*. She wants to reconstruct historically and deconstruct analytically the way in which socialist education took shape as a hegemonic discourse. Like Victoria Lerner in her classic study,¹² Buenfil emphasizes the variable meanings of socialism, the sociopolitical conditions under which the discourse of socialist education was produced, and how its elements were variously combined and “overdetermined” by social interests.

What makes Buenfil’s study original is its attempt to identify and give voice to the main protagonists and antagonists of socialist education, to analyze their discursive strategies, and to specify the conditions under which these strategies were deployed. She introduces a summary profile of personages who were key influences in the “imaginary construction” of socialist education and summarizes the key components of the Cardenista educational program. Furthermore, Buenfil ingeniously includes diverse and nontraditional sources, ranging from the placards of workers demonstrating in favor of socialist education to speeches and notes by union leaders and educational pioneers as well as voices from the “civil sector” in pamphlets, letters, and speeches from the conservative Unión Nacional de Padres de Familia, exiled bishops, and opposition politicians. This array of sources allows readers to appreciate the range of positions and discursive strategies in play at the time.

Buenfil then attempts to interrogate her findings for what they might say about the “balance” of the Cárdenas project. Keying off other interpreters of the epoch, she proclaims that Cárdenas drew on the “mística de la Revolución Mexicana,” especially manifested in the “línea socializante presente en la Constitución de 1917” (p. 316), to create a unique Mexican socialism. The socialist imaginario present in “official” documents—the notions of democracy, national identity, popular identity, worker and peasant identities, and education—were all constructed symbolically through Cardenista discourse in terms congruent with the mística of the Mexican Revolution. In this aspect, Buenfil’s work resonates most with that of Adolfo Gilly and the redemptive vision of Cardenista praxis.

Yet Buenfil also ventures a more complex account of how and why the project for socialist education ultimately failed. Her final chapter exhorts readers to reject monocausal explanations and seek the combination of factors that ultimately led to its demise. She urges scholars to move beyond bipolar models of conflict to examine the multiple antagonisms of the period as well as the heterogeneity within the “revolutionary family” that framed and supported the Cardenista project. This proposal is an implicit challenge to Sosa’s obsession with the explanatory key of violence. Finally, Buenfil recognizes the genuine novelty of the “*propuesta cardenista*,” hence

12. Lerner, *La educación socialista*.

Cardenismo's rupture with prior postrevolutionary regimes, but she emphasizes the role that the very radicalization of the Cárdenas period played in bringing about a corresponding radicalization of conservative forces (pp. 313–16).

While *Cardenismo, argumentación y antagonismo en educación* is ultimately limited by the capital-centrism of Buenfil's narrative sources, two other books under review here fill out the regional story. Although the works by Cortés and Vaughan use diverse methods and pursue different concerns, they allow an important glimpse into the regional manifestations and appropriations of socialist education in Michoacán and in Puebla and Sonora, respectively. We will begin with Cortés's *Lázaro Cárdenas y su proyecto cultural en Michoacán* to move in the direction of this broader social dynamic.

Ostensibly, Cortés set out to do a straightforward study of literary production during the Cárdenas years in his home state of Michoacán. She wished to examine the manner in which the novel expressed the problematic that the Cardenista program was addressing and that therefore aided in its "political projection" (p. 19). Yet as the second volume in a collection honoring the hundredth anniversary of Cárdenas's birth, Cortés's study verges on hagiography. It is not a critical study but a reconstruction of events surrounding Cárdenas's life and work that relies on his own writings and speeches as well as key secondary sources like Enrique Krauze's *General misionero*. The first section provides an extended presentation of Cárdenas's "ethical-moral" trajectory, from his early family experiences to military service to his candidacy for president. Yet one finds a curious disjuncture between this introductory biographical section and the second section of the book (the third merely summarizes the literary contributions of several prominent Michoacán novelists writing during the Cárdenas years). Cortés undertakes the task of analyzing the years 1934 to 1940 in Michoacán to "understand the regional behavior and receptivity surrounding the democratizing proposals of General Lázaro Cárdenas" (p. 23). This section is interesting in itself, especially for its insight into the antagonisms played out in the regional Universidad Michoacana and the debates over whether the classical humanist model could be transformed into "socialist education." This part also presents an intriguing discussion of student culture at the university and the ideological impact of illustrious visitors who engaged with students in the cafés and open spaces of Morelia (many of them had been invited by Cárdenas to find safe haven in Mexico from the Spanish Civil War).

Yet this cosmopolitan atmosphere produced a curious phenomenon, according to Cortés. Instead of harmonizing higher learning with the unresolved national problems, the Michoacán university halls became an arena for discussions about Marx, Lenin and Engels, and life in an idealized Soviet Union. Thus a break appeared in the links that Cárdenas had

envisioned among the university, scientific progress, and popular needs. As Cárdenas himself commented, “Culture without the concrete sense of solidarity with the pain of the people is barren, limited, a sheer ornament for the parasites who stand in the way of collective progress” (p. 133). Cortés documents that the university ultimately failed to provide the link between higher learning and an engaged conception of socialist education.

What in Cortés’s study appears to be a divorce between Cárdenas’s grand project and its local realization becomes in Vaughan’s impressive study of rural schooling in the 1930s a dialectic process. *Cultural Politics in Revolution: Teachers, Peasants, and Schools in Mexico, 1930–1940*, the most conceptually sophisticated and balanced of these three books, examines the multiple and complex articulations between the local and the national spheres. Her early chapters review and encapsulate most of the dynamics explored by Buenfil and Cortés, but Vaughan takes the next step by detailing the way in which socialist education as part of the “cultural project” of Cardenismo played itself out in local and regional histories. Most impressive is the fact that Vaughan was not content to study a single community or region. Rather, she chose two well-defined regions in Puebla and two in Sonora. This strategy yields four fine-grained portraits of conflict and negotiation between national and local actors and politics and thus allows readers to perceive important continuities and ruptures across contexts. The mediating particularities of state governments and local hegemonic traditions emerge forcefully in Vaughan’s account, giving it substance and nuance. She shows how Cardenista socialist education got worked out “on the ground.” This process depended on many local circumstances: the relative strength of certain “Porfirian legacies,” the local power of the church (strong in Puebla, weak in Sonora), the effectiveness of the different states’ party-making machinery, the strength and character of local caciques, and similar factors.

One advantage of *Cultural Politics in Revolution* is that it begins in 1930 and thus situates the Cardenista socialist school as part of a broader postrevolutionary project. Vaughan, who wrote an earlier “revisionist history” stressing the continuity of Porfirian and revolutionary schooling,¹³ believes that the Cardenista school extended and deepened the “revolutionary” idea of schooling started by early education ministers José Vasconcelos and Moisés Sáenz. She thus shows that at least two components of the socialist school—its anticlerical or “lay” character and its tendency to prescribe a broad transformative role for the teacher—were already firmly in place by 1934. The movement for “socialist education” only amplified and gave new impetus to these postrevolutionary imperatives. The components are amply illustrated in the case of Puebla, as Vaughan notes:

13. Mary Kay Vaughan, *The State, Education, and Social Class in Mexico, 1880–1928* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1982).

"Whereas the prerevolutionary school had etched itself into a restricted place in daily life, the revolutionary school presumed to overflow customary boundaries in order to transform community life" (p. 65). School clearly became a place for the state to challenge the power of the church over local hearts and minds: school "was part and parcel of the campaign to appropriate citizens for the state" (p. 66).

Echoing Buenfil, Vaughan's work illustrates nicely the way that "official" political rhetoric, issuing from a single politician (Cárdenas) first gets elaborated into a series of diverse and occasionally contradictory projects at the level of elite politics and then gets historically "filtered" and "appropriated" by different local groups and institutions, according to their interests. In this case, the lens is focused on educational policy before and during the Cárdenas presidency. Vaughan's work is not a study of Cardenismo per se, but it allows readers to see how Cardenismo attempted to extend and sustain certain kinds of "revolutionary" educational projects while altering others. Vaughan aptly characterizes the local school as an "arena for cultural politics" where the expectations and interests of many actors are played out (p. 4). Along with Joseph and Nugent, she is centrally concerned with the role of schools in how the national state was formed during the postrevolutionary period, and more generally with the interaction between civil society and hegemonic elites. Vaughan characterizes such interaction as a "dialectical process" (p. 9) and proposes the concept of "negotiation" as a significant way to analyze the dialectic. Yet the concept of negotiation is used not only to understand the relationship between the local and the national. Rather, Vaughan examines various levels of negotiation through the Mexican social formation of the 1930s, and this approach lends her work much power. Like Buenfil, she studies the negotiations and discursive constructions involved in elaborating an educational "script" by the Secretaría de Educación Pública, one that would eventually take the form of so-called socialist education. Vaughan then examines the diversity in teachers' appropriations of this script, their adaptations and creative implementations of educational policy, as another level of negotiation. Finally, she looks at the "negotiations," sometimes violent and contentious, among teachers, school administrators, parents, local powerholders, and state government officials that resulted in the specific educational events of the decade.

Other Fields, Other Views

As noted, the Cardenista conception of socialist education went hand in hand with the regime's redemptive efforts in agrarian reform. Most Cardenistas envisioned rural schools as tools for educating peasants about their rights as workers as well as teaching the skills and habits necessary to create productive agricultural units. Given Cárdenas's unprecedented and aggressive initiatives in agrarian reform and his attempt to cre-

ate and empower agrarian communities or *ejidos*, few scholars had questioned until recently the genuinely popular impulses behind them. Like Raquel Sosa, John Gledhill confirms a doubt in this regard. In a wide-ranging, even rambling piece of scholarship, Gledhill narrates the history of the “reluctant ejido” of Guaracha, near Cárdenas’s hometown of Jiquilpán de Juárez, Michoacán.

An anthropologist, Gledhill conducted fieldwork in this community throughout much of the 1980s. The introductory conceptual chapters of *Casi Nada: A Study of Agrarian Reform in the Homeland of Cardenismo* situate Gledhill’s work in theories on the peasantry and the state. He then moves on to tell the story of how a Porfirian hacienda in Cárdenas’s backyard, still managing to thrive in the 1920s after the revolution, eventually met its demise with the rise of Cardenista hegemony. In this chapter, Gledhill also attempts to explain the resistance of hacienda *peones* to the agrarista cause of Cárdenas (p. 80ff.). Reviewing the evidence, Gledhill opts for a multifaceted explanation that combines the repressive power of the hacienda apparatus, the relative security of *peón* subsistence, and the ideological-coercive power of Catholic commentary and worldview. He notes that the few who opted for agrarianism were often among the better-off and least religious of the *peones*.

Subsequent chapters of *Casi Nada* chart the history of the reluctant founding of the collective ejido in Guaracha, its subsequent descent into factionalism and improductivity, and the shift from a sputtering collectivism into a more fully capitalized “*neolatifundismo*” after 1940. Gledhill emphasizes the “spectacular failure” of collectivism in the ejido, even after the original ejidatarios were given the hacienda sugar mill for their benefit (p. 15). Its failure is even more poignant because Guaracha was a pet project of Lázaro Cárdenas, a case in which he personally intervened. An intermediate chapter gives detailed data on patterns of land rental and sales from the 1940s through the 1960s, charting the transitions that many Guarachans made from *peones* to peasants to migrants or latifundistas, documenting the rise of a class of “new *ejidatarios*” among the return migrants and professionals who could afford to buy the increasingly commoditized “ejidal rights.” Gledhill offers two detailed chapters on the causes and the effects of internal and international migration from Guaracha.¹⁴ A final substantive chapter on “peasant agriculture in the epoch of Banrural” (the state-owned bank charged with timely distribution of credits to small agriculturalists) examines the more recent fate of ejidatarios during a phase of increased internationalization of capital, neoliberal disinvestment by the state, and bureaucratic corruption. This chapter is capped off by a set of conclusions.

14. Transnational migration and increased immiseration are the themes of a subsequent book by Gledhill, *Neoliberalism, Transnationalization, and Rural Poverty* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1995).

Casi Nada could be said to share much with the revisionist history that has stressed the construction of state domination during the Cárdenas era. Gledhill suggests that most recipients of land reform were reluctant, if not outright hostile, participants. Many had been active supporters of the Cristero cause throughout the postrevolutionary decade of the 1920s, and the governorship of Lázaro Cárdenas in Michoacán (1928–1932) provoked even further conflicts. Gledhill's case certainly forces scholars to recognize that particular instances of agrarian reform did not emerge as the state's response to direct popular demands from below. Rather, agrarian reform was carried out perhaps as often as not "from above," by decree of Cárdenas himself or his agrarian "consultants."

Cardenista agrarian reform, with its enthusiastic endorsement of collectivism, did not always win over adherents or produce the positive results desired. Former *peones acasillados* (indentured peons) and campesinos largely rejected the collective form of labor and ownership, remaining skeptical about the state's *modus operandi* for decades to come. Gledhill's detailed case study invites readers to ponder the academic and political construction of "popular Cardenismo." If the thesis of a dialectically constructed popular state can largely be borne out, it must be qualified and nuanced by the findings of Gledhill. Perhaps the broader outlines of the Cardenista project were drawn up through a dialogue with popular protest and imagination, but this process of dialogue did not prevent such a project from being imposed on other "popular groups," even those located in the *tierra natal* of Cárdenas himself. Perhaps an even more nuanced formulation would emphasize the mediation of local structures of power, in this case dominated ironically by the machinations of Cárdenas's younger brothers. As Gledhill observes, "In reality Cardenismo in Michoacán did not arise organically from local rural society and popular organizations. Cardenismo was built on the existence of genuinely popular grievances and aspirations: but its success rested on the political facilities it offered to peasant leaders for the pursuit of their objectives through alliance with outside forces" (p. 37). According to Gledhill, Cárdenas was frequently insensitive to local conditions, appointing abusive caciques because they were his friends or loyal followers. Consequently, his "social revolution" was often experienced "by those below as arbitrariness, corruption, and caciquismo" (p. 66).

What about Workers and Women?

Cárdenas's ambiguous policy of empowering the previously disenfranchised is also the subject of Gustavo López Pardo's monograph on the experiment in the workers' administration of the Mexican railways between 1938 and 1940. *La administración obrera de los Ferrocarriles Nacionales de México* is a timely contribution to the growing literature on Mexico's

labor movement, which has dealt mostly with the corporatist model of state-labor relations personified by the Confederación de Trabajadores de México (CTM) and its long-lived leader Fidel Velázquez.¹⁵ In this literature, the unique experiment in labor control over its workplace and enterprise has received only a perfunctory mention. López Pardo sets out to correct that lacuna in Mexican labor studies.

When Cárdenas expropriated the Ferrocarriles Nacionales de México in June 1937, the railway workers took over an enterprise with obsolete equipment and finances that were in shambles. The experiment lasted for over two years before ending in 1940 in an utter fiasco. López Pardo's factual narrative demonstrates that the catastrophic result of the workers' administration was a foregone conclusion. First, the workers' control over the company between 1938 and 1940 coincided with the latter part of Cárdenas's term in office, when the government treasury lacked the indispensable funds to put the bankrupt enterprise back on its feet. That herculean task was left up to the new administrators. They tried to raise the cargo tariffs for the mining industry, but Cárdenas blocked the initiative for fear of antagonizing mine owners. The unionized workers agreed not to demand higher wages, but they refused to exchange their former subservience to the company for subordination to the state, a situation highlighted by the ban on worker-cum-administrators' ability to strike. Hence the workers and the government remained at loggerheads on many issues concerning the administration of the railway company and the status of workers' rights throughout the two years that the workers remained at the helm of the enterprise.

The workers had to relinquish administration of the railway after trains suffered accidents on unmaintained rails and it became evident that the workers' lack of discipline on the job was posing a danger to passengers, cargo, and themselves. López Pardo's dispassionate account concludes that in the final analysis, the labor union's dual role as boss and as guarantor of labor's rights was untenable. As an employer, the labor union was subordinate to the government. But as a union, it had to answer to the workers. The two roles that the labor union had to perform were clearly incompatible. Here again, the ambiguity of Cárdenas's popular politics came into play: while on the one hand the president empowered workers by entrusting them with the administration of their bread-winning workplace, on the other he tied their hands by curbing their autonomy as administrators and limiting their freedom for action as syndicalists.

15. Arturo Anguiano, *El estado y la política obrera*; Jorge Basurto, *Cárdenas y el poder sindical* (Mexico City: Era, 1983); and Samuel León and Ignacio Marván, *En el cardenismo (1934–1940)* (Mexico City: Siglo Veintiuno, 1985). Velázquez led the CTM from its inception in 1938 until he died in June 1997. A more complex treatment of Mexico's labor politics is that of Kevin Middlebrook, *The Paradox of Revolution: Labor, the State, and Authoritarianism in Mexico* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995).

Unlike workers and peasants, who constituted a major reservoir of political support for Cárdenas and his national project, women were largely left to themselves to organize as they could. Cárdenas believed in women's equality, to be sure, even when the overwhelming majority of Mexican men did not. The government engaged women as schoolteachers and technicians but rarely as policy makers. As Esperanza Tuñón explains, women wanted to go beyond the terrain cut out for them by men in government. As individuals, women wanted to participate in politics; as a gender, they sought to attain universal suffrage. To achieve their ends, women organized by using existing institutions and parties but tried to keep their distance from the male leadership to avoid jeopardizing their freedom of action and the attainment of their goals.

The thrust of Tuñón's *Mujeres que se organizan: El Frente Unico Pro Derechos de la Mujer, 1935–1938* is to examine the relatively successful collaboration of women belonging to the Partido Nacional Revolucionario (PNR), the party of the revolution, and women belonging to the Partido Comunista Mexicano. As Tuñón shows, despite underlying ideological divergences between the PNR activists and the Communists on how to improve the political and economic situation of peasant and working women and women's right to vote, an overarching solidarity in opposing family violence, favoring easy divorce procedures for women, advocating employment, and defending prostitutes kept this unlikely partnership alive. Women managed to stick together despite their ideological differences. Several factors contributed to women's success in organizing, according to Tuñón. She was told by Adelina Zendejas, an outspoken Communist, "Yo fui a la vez que miembro del PC miembro del PNR" (p. 88). Ballad singer and popular art propagandist Concha Michel expressed the matter this way, "La lucha de la mujer es por la vida, no por la política o la economía, capitalista o socialista" (p. 120). Michel saw women in power as no different from men. Moreover, women like her came to the conclusion that the Communist Party lacked any real policy on women's equality. Women united when they perceived their shared gendered concerns to be more important than political, largely masculine interests. Most of the politically sophisticated Communist women recognized the limitations of communist ideology in bringing about women's equality. Concha Michel tore up her party card because the Communist secretary general (who happened to be her husband) minimized "the woman question" as "the superstructure that would wither away with the destruction of capitalism."¹⁶

Cárdenas endorsed this organizing endeavor, as Tuñón points out, because "he needed the PNR to hegemonize the social movements" (p. 69). Why then did Cárdenas not push more forcefully for the constitutional

16. Jocelyn Olcott, "Sing What the People Sing: Feminism, Culture, and Revolution in the Life and Philosophy of Concha Michel," in *Forjando matrias: Las mujeres y la historia mexicana*, edited by David Sweet and Julia Tuñón, forthcoming.

change that would have given women the right to vote? He believed in incorporating women fully into public life, but in 1937 he could not overrule the Senate's refusal to sanction women's right to vote. Tuñón attributes Cárdenas's inability to the differences existing within his party. As the women Tuñón interviewed concluded, Cárdenas feared that given the rightward movement of the course of politics against him, women would vote under the influence of the Catholic Church for the candidate on the far Right (p. 110). As a result, Mexican women did not gain the right to vote in national elections until 1958.

Mujeres que se organizan is strictly about women. Tuñón does not discuss men's reactions to women's organizing or reveal whether women's activism aligned women with any men or drove the sexes further apart. Was the gender divide more pronounced following the Cárdenas era, or perhaps even polarized? One reason that such questions can barely be addressed by Tuñón is that her book relies on rather scarce sources. The main source consists of mainstream newspapers, which were unlikely to be sympathetic to women's organizing and, being written by men, might have been insensitive to women's concern for adequate reporting. The other source of information is the valuable but ever subjective set of oral histories. Thus one finds little substance to mediate between the bias of Mexican male journalists and the bias of the women interviewed. Finally, Cárdenas is largely absent from Tuñón's narrative, demonstrating that women were ultimately a weak mediating link in the state-society construction during the Cardenista era.

Conclusions

We began this essay by noting the recent success of Lázaro Cárdenas's son Cuauhtémoc in the Mexican electoral arena. Cuauhtémoc won by challenging the authoritarianism and corruption of a state and its political party that his father had helped construct through radical social action and the terms of a popular nationalist discourse. More broadly, the new Cardenista party, the Partido de la Revolución Democrática, has enjoyed great success in certain regions of the country, such as Cárdenas's home state of Michoacán, where neoliberal policies have hit hardest and issues of land distribution and rural poverty continue to hold great sway.¹⁷

This imbrication of the past in the present, the recurrence of themes and figures throughout the modern Mexican political landscape, raises pointedly the historical question about the dialectic formation of state and society. It also reenergizes scholarly debates about the meaning and intent of Cardenista initiatives in the 1930s. The studies reviewed here demon-

17. Gledhill, *Neoliberalism, Transnationalization, and Rural Poverty*.

strate that no real consensus has been achieved, but they allow us to clarify the issues and advance a few observations of our own.

Perhaps most poignantly, the studies orient us toward the contradictory legacy of Cardenismo as a set of legitimating myths of state. For authors like Gilly, Cortés, and Vaughan, who emphasize the responsiveness of Cárdenas to popular aspirations, the legacy of Cardenismo is more like a historical memory of justice. For others such as Sosa and Gledhill, it is a founding myth that, in the absence of justice or democracy in the post-Cárdenas years, has been positively recast in more recent political conjunctures. As Gledhill comments, we need an analysis of "the way myth, representation and practice enter into a dialectic that has reconstituted the significance of Cardenismo for later generations and given it a renewed vigor as the source of legitimacy and inspiration for genuinely oppositional practices with spontaneous popular roots" (p. 30). Alan Knight's essay in *Perspectivas sobre el cardenismo* notes that the myth of Cardenismo took root deeply only in certain communities and regions that were predisposed to its radical message. He suggests that on balance, the Cardenista project of creating a new revolutionary subject failed. Socialist education, for instance, might have altered or strengthened some local sensibilities, but what eventually had a far more enduring impact were the forces of market and urbanization that gained strength from the 1940s onward. Yet we would argue that to deny the "educative" gains of Cardenismo is to understate the ongoing power of the "myth," which clearly informs Mexican subaltern consciousness today.

What do these studies reveal about the ways in which state and society were linked through discourse and action in the 1930s, in such a manner that this epoch retains ideological force today? One way to bridge the stances of authors like Gilly versus Sosa and Gledhill is to emphasize the temporal and spatial disjuncture between the "moment" of formation of Cárdenas's imaginario, which occurred through a deep appreciation of popular aspirations, and the "moments" in which the imaginario has been drawn on to create policy and practice. In other words, if Cárdenas developed his program by witnessing the conditions of popular groups throughout the 1920s and 1930s in various parts of the republic, his application of the program did not always coincide with the original times and places of his inspiration. His trust in his own imaginario as an authentic representation of popular demands led him to take specific steps that did not always satisfy such demands. Thus, in the process of separating the decision making from the mediating instance of his imaginario, the state from the society, Cárdenas paved the way for future abuses of power.

The nine books under review also show the multiple and contradictory ways that the Cardenista state ruled. It made attempts to give generous resources and leeway to different underprivileged groups yet often did so just as these groups suffered adverse circumstances. Consequently, land

sometimes went to peasants who did not really want it, and a company was entrusted to workers when they could not really manage it. Taken together, the books demonstrate the tension existing between Cárdenas's need to construct a strong state as the best guarantor of carrying forth the people's will in adverse national and international contexts versus the empowerment of that will itself. Yet as Joseph and Nugent and Vaughan have amply discussed, Cárdenas's form of rule, an instance of the broader Mexican Revolutionary state, was the result of negotiation between powerholders and subaltern classes. This negotiated construction of the state's hegemony gave a veneer of legitimacy to the corporatist model of state-society linkage but ended by eclipsing the popular will entirely and accruing arbitrary power to the future state and its corrupt underlings. Even though Cárdenas's utopia was only partially realized and the people's demands were fulfilled only temporarily, the Cárdenas "project" was never forgotten. It became a myth that the Mexican people have evoked in dire times as an unfulfilled promise, and one that the state could fall back on when subsequent presidents who reneged on the Cardenista utopia needed to prop up their flagging regimes. As one peasant told Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas during the 1988 presidential campaign, "When he [Lázaro Cárdenas] was president, even the birds sang cheerfully . . . because in those days . . . , it seemed as if Jesus Christ walked on earth."¹⁸

18. Gilly, *Cartas a Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas*, 238. This letter from Sonora is also cited by Bantjes in *As If Jesus Walked on Earth*. Bantjes recalls the collective memory of the peasants and looks far beyond the mythmaking at the means by which Cardenismo in Sonora "was embraced by some, opposed by others, compromised and refashioned beyond recognition" (p. xviii).