

## MYTH AND METHOD IN MODERN MEXICAN HISTORIOGRAPHY

*INVITACIÓN A LA MICROHISTORIA*. By LUIS GONZÁLEZ. (México: Sepsetentas, 1973. Pp. 185. \$10.00).

*LA TEORÍA DE LA HISTORIA EN MÉXICO, 1940–1973*. Edited by ALVARO MATUTE. (México: Sepsetentas, 1974. Pp. 208. \$10.00).

These two new volumes in the Sepsetentas collection are devoted to the problem of historical methodology and recent historiographical production in Mexico. Luís González's book consists of a series of essays written by the author at different stages of his career. The first is a descriptive conceptual essay in which he attempts to define the characteristics and realm of local history. He disagrees with the English and French term for it and proposes that of "micro-history," by which he means the study of the *patria chica*, the limited region in which one is raised and with which one is acquainted in personal terms.

González defines micro-history by opposing it to maxi-history (regular, traditional history) and establishes the differences between the two. While history deals mainly with important events and people whose actions are unique and relevant, micro-history deals with commonplace events and people, with the regular life of everyday men and women whose actions are not necessarily outstanding and whose patterns of life do not change abruptly. In this definition of micro-history, González shows the heavy influence of the French *Annales* school. For both the French and the Mexican historians, real understanding of the texture of history can only be acquired by knowing and constantly referring to the local and simple events in the daily life of common people.

Ultimately, in this debate between the two types of history, what we are dealing with is the opposition between description and generalization. History, as a discipline, aims nevertheless to include both in its methodology. On the one hand, it is important for an historian to find the data, which he selects, and to describe the events as accurately as possible. On the other hand, inasmuch as history aims to give interpretations and hypotheses to explain general historical phenomena, it is, by the same token, making generalizations that may not always be accurate when applied to local and particular events. It is not really the case of two opposing disciplines; on the contrary, it is only two sides of the same coin.

The second of the essays is a more critical evaluation of the methods and characteristics of local history. González centers his criticisms around its presentation and the state of research in contemporary Mexico. He proposes a new local history with its own features: "One which is not a copy of our traditional history, nor one which is practiced in the developed countries" (p. 65). His claim is for a new kind of local history, consistent with the Mexican reality and including topics relevant to the Mexican case. The third part of the book includes a

bibliography of one thousand titles published between 1871 and 1970. This is a most helpful aid for anyone interested in Mexican micro-history.

González's book has the merit of establishing the criteria by which a local historian should work. By doing so, he is making a contribution to the methodology of history and, ultimately, to the historian's craft. This is particularly important in the case of Mexico since systematization and acceptance of local history as a discipline are still not well established. Micro-history is young and now is a good time to establish its professional methods and aims. This has been González's job.

Matute's work is a collection of interpretative essays, written in Mexico between 1940 and 1968, on the nature of historical knowledge. He chooses 1940 as a departure date because, according to him, it is then that the "professionalization of history takes place" with the establishment of history as a professional career at the National University. This perspective reveals a rather narrow focus by considering that only academic historiographical production is serious and worth publishing.

In the Introduction, Matute describes what he considers the two main historiographical positions during the period analyzed: positivism and historicism. The authors are presented by a brief biography, but their bibliography is not given. They include some prestigious Mexican historians such as Alfonso Caso, José Gaos, Luís González, Edmundo O'Gorman, and Ramon Iglesia. However, the selection of essays is heavily biased and overemphasizes historicism, Matute's own historiographical position. The main thrust is the 1945 polemic between Silvio Zavala, representative of positivism, and O'Gorman, then a bright young student who defended historicism. Because of this emphasis, some of the most important contemporary Mexican historians, such as Silvio Zavala and Daniel Cosío Villegas, are given short shrift or not included. The case of Zavala is particularly noteworthy because he is charged with being an example of the positivistic position, yet no selections by him are presented. This makes the book less useful than might otherwise be the case. It also centers around a debate that was relevant in 1945 but not today.

These two books can only be compared in that both are devoted to the problems of historical methodology in present-day Mexico. However, they are different in both format and content. Matute's book is a collection of texts by well-known authors who are included because of their relevance to modern Mexican historiography. Yet the selection is so partial that one does not have a complete overview of the various trends in contemporary Mexican historical writings. Representatives of the newest historiographical directions, such as economic history, are missing. The work of Enrique Florescano, to name but one, is not mentioned.

The González book is of a different character. It is a presentation and an invitation to follow a particular current in Mexican historiography. He deals mainly with the empirical problems that a micro-historian faces: finding and checking sources, digging in old family papers for relevant materials, evaluating sources that might overemphasize local events. These problems are not different in kind from those of traditional history, yet their dimensions change when examined under the reduced yet sharper lens of micro-history.

In his invitation, González states that the main condition for a good micro-historian is the love of his craft and a personal involvement with the topic and the area that is being researched. In this sense there is no contradiction between him and O’Gorman when the latter states that our possibility of historical knowledge lies in the fact that the past is a reality that forms part of our own life. Both authors require an involvement between the historian and his topic. However, there is a basic difference. For O’Gorman this need goes beyond the immediate conditions of being familiar with one’s own micro-history. He poses the question in conceptual terms. The historian and his subject are closely related because of the nature of the past itself. We are only able to know and learn about the past, inasmuch as there is no qualitative difference between the human past as such and our personal one. According to O’Gorman, it is because of this that the nature of historical knowledge is by definition different from that of the natural or exact sciences. In this particular nature of the past lies our possibility of interpretation of it. Therefore, each generation could and should reinterpret the past and make it meaningful for its own present. It is a dialectical relation between past and present that ultimately constitutes the field of history.

With their theoretical reflections on the nature of the past and therefore of history, both the O’Gorman articles in Matute’s book and González’s reflections on micro-history make a useful contribution to the problems and methodology of history in present-day Mexico.

CARMEN RAMOS  
*El Colegio de México*