

PEASANTS AND POLITICS IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY MEXICO

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- LAS REBELIONES CAMPESINAS EN MEXICO, 1819-1906.* By LETICIA REINA. (Mexico City: Siglo XXI, 1980. Pp. 437.)
- DISORDER AND PROGRESS: BANDITS, POLICE, AND MEXICAN DEVELOPMENT.* By PAUL VANDERWOOD. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1981. Pp. 264. \$21.50 cloth, \$8.95 paper.)
- COMUNIDADES INDIGENAS FRENTE A LA CIUDAD DE MEXICO: TENOCHTITLAN Y TLAHELCO, SUS PUEBLOS Y BARRIOS, 1812-1919.* By ANDRES LIRA. (Zamora: Colegio de Michoacán, 1983. Pp. 426.)
- YAQUI RESISTANCE AND SURVIVAL: THE STRUGGLE FOR LAND AND AUTONOMY, 1821-1910.* By EVELYN HU-DEHART. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984. Pp. 293. \$27.50.)
- ESPERANDO A LOZADA.* By JEAN MEYER. (Zamora: Colegio de Michoacán, 1984. Pp. 268.)
- REBELION AGRARIA DE MANUEL LOZADA, 1873.* By MARIO ALFONSO ALDANA RENDON. (Mexico City: Secretaría de Educación Pública, 1983. Pp. 238.)
- YUCATAN'S GUILDED AGE: HACIENDAS, HENEQUEN, AND INTERNATIONAL HARVESTER, 1860-1915.* By ALLEN WELLS. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1985. Pp. 239. \$27.50.)

In 1821 independence brought watershed change to relations between the state and the agrarian population in Mexico. This change was not bestowed by visionary social reformers; Hidalgo and Morelos, if they were such reformers, had been eliminated early in the independence conflicts. Rather, change was inherent in independence itself because independence brought politics to Mexico. For the first time since the conquest and the incorporation of Mexico into the expanding pan-European world, the state that defined Mexico was based within its own borders. Moreover, Mexicans (at least a favored few) could begin to compete for control of that state and try to use it as an instrument of their interests. For many in the political arena, that possibility meant working to make the new state a tool of elite goals, one of which was to undermine the corporate rights to land and local rule that had long sustained peasant communities in Mexico.

During the lengthy colonial era, Mexican elites were rarely able to use powers of state in the role of simple and direct agents of class interests against the peasantry. The colonial regime, while ready to preserve the wealth and social advantages of creole oligarchs, was also committed to a policy of social stability based on preserving the land rights and limited self-government of peasant communities. Until the end of the colonial era, most agrarian conflicts in Mexico were resolved in colonial courts that were accepted as legal arbiters by both elites and peasant villagers. The colonial state—not ultimately based in Mexico—enjoyed a structural position of substantial autonomy from Mexican elites. Rather than serve immediate elite interests, the colonial state worked to preserve the long-term stability of the colonial structure, thus simultaneously limiting and sustaining elite powers. That relationship of relative autonomy linking Mexican elites and the colonial state helped to preserve a remarkable social stability during three centuries.¹

Ultimately, Mexican independence meant Mexican elites taking control of the Mexican state. Elite divisions, regional conflicts, and economic dislocations kept the new national state disputed, weak, and poor for decades after 1821. But those difficulties should not blind scholars to the goal of those who often fought for control of the Mexican state during the nineteenth century: they aimed to use that state as an instrument of class interests, often against the peasant majority. The persistent attempts of elite factions with competing goals to gain control of state powers and then to direct them against the traditional rights of the rural populace, thus provoking escalating agrarian conflicts, comprise a central theme shared by the works reviewed here.

Two books take a broad, national perspective and emphasize the importance of escalating violence in relations between the state and the rural poor in nineteenth-century Mexico. In *Las rebeliones campesinas en México*, Leticia Reina presents the fruits of extensive research in the archives of the Mexican Defense Ministry. She uses the records of those charged with stopping peasant revolts to assemble narratives describing the origins and development of rural uprisings in widespread regions throughout the nineteenth century. Primarily a collection of documents, this work makes available unique and often indispensable materials. It also reveals that although revolts occurred sporadically throughout the century, they were concentrated in the decades from the 1840s to the early 1880s. Thus an intersection appears between the political and military conflicts in which Mexican conservatives and liberals, the United States, and France fought to determine the future dimensions and directions of Mexico, on the one hand, and the most intense and enduring rural social confrontations, on the other. Peasant protests were linked to national and international political develop-

ments, and consequently, future analysts must explore the complex dimensions of those linkages.

Paul Vanderwood's *Disorder and Progress: Bandits, Police, and Mexican Development* focuses on the response of the politically victorious liberals to that widespread rural conflict—the creation and expansion of the *rurales*, a national rural police force. Vanderwood downplays the social content of the disorders of the middle of the nineteenth century. He portrays those who stole but did not proclaim clear ideologies as mere outlaw entrepreneurs. Certainly the *rurales*, like most police, viewed the objects of their enforcement as bandits, brigands, and outlaws. They rarely inquired about the social origins or the social goals of those who broke the law. Yet it seems socially significant that so many petty entrepreneurs operated outside the law in nineteenth-century Mexico. The line between social protest and outlaw entrepreneurship is less clear to me than to Vanderwood. Even pure brigandage may be a form of nonideological protest against a prevailing order—not an attempt to change that order, but still a statement of objections against it.

Whatever the debate set off by Vanderwood's portrayal of the objects of police actions, his analysis of the origins and evolution of the *rurales* is a major contribution to Mexican historiography. He shows that as the liberals began to consolidate national power in the 1860s, one pivot of their policy for pacifying rural areas was the creation of a national rural constabulary. He probes early difficulties of organization and finance as well as the incorporation of many former outlaws into the new force, thus limiting its efficiency although perhaps enhancing its reputation. Vanderwood then traces the expansion and consolidation of the *rurales* during the Díaz era. No longer recruited among brigands, but primarily among artisans and peasants, the late-century *rurales* maintained their reputations as bandits with badges. Their effectiveness remained limited, but they were important as a force personally led by the president, being thus available for use in both political persuasion and social control. The *rurales* never fully inhibited or contained social disorders, whether banditry or social protests. But their creation and development emphasize that liberals from Juárez to Díaz perceived armed force as the preferred means of controlling rural unrest. To enforce the power of their state, the liberals aimed to increase its coercive capacity—with but partial success. They rarely considered the alternative of policies that might broaden the legitimacy of their state among the rural populace, perhaps lessening the need for coercive social control.

More detailed inquiries into the relations between peasants and politics focus best on local or regional developments. Several such studies have appeared recently, and they suggest that all Mexican elites

were not equally devoted to using state powers to undermine peasant rights and then contain their protests. Liberals proved far more ready to assault peasant traditions and create police forces; conservatives were often willing to let peasant customs endure.

Andrés Lira's *Comunidades indígenas frente a la ciudad de México* examines the relations among the national government, the government of the Federal District (Mexico City), and the Indian corporations in the city and the surrounding countryside during the nineteenth century. He emphasizes the long and complex struggle between Indian corporations, which were founded in the colonial era and defended traditional rights of community landholding and self-government, and liberalizing politicians working to vest power in the national and city governments and to turn community lands into private property.

Lira provides a detailed discussion of the increasingly well-known development of liberal policies toward indigenous corporations. Beginning in the Spanish Cortes of 1812, these reformers worked to deny Indian communities the "privileges" of corporate landholding and local rule. Those policies were debated by Mexican politicians until the national triumph of the liberals brought the famous Ley Lerdo of 1856, which denied all corporations the property rights that had maintained both local governments and subsistence economies. After 1856 debates focused on the implementation of the Ley Lerdo.

Most innovative is Lira's chronicle of the political resistance to the liberals' vision, a resistance that forged an alliance between conservative politicians and urban and rural Indian corporations. During the years of political instability immediately after independence, persistent debates about how to deal with Indian corporations prevented the implementation of any coherent policies. Lira shows that whatever laws were enacted before 1856, most communities in the environs of the capital successfully turned inward, clung to their lands and self-government, and carried on as always while politicians argued about their future.

In 1835 the Indian corporations found an important ally in a conservative national regime working to preserve the existing system of land rights and local rule. That alliance of elite conservatives and indigenous corporations (along with the church) helped to preserve community rights for another two decades. It was only with the triumph of the liberals in the long contest for control of the national state (they won in 1855, again in 1861, and finally in 1867) that the policy of denying land rights and local rule to Indian communities could begin to be implemented. Finally, Lira demonstrates that the Indian corporations' opposition to the liberals was well considered. Few communities collected the payments due them for the properties the liberals forced them to sell. Many Indian families lost subsistence lands that they sud-

denly owned as private property, without the legal protection of the community and newly subject to market pressures. Lira's *Comunidades indígenas* explores these fundamental issues and many more in the most detailed study of the politics of state-Indian relations in nineteenth-century Mexico.

An important parallel work, which focuses on the state of Sonora on the northwestern frontier, is Evelyn Hu-DeHart's *Yaqui Resistance and Survival*. It traces the relations between the Yaqui and Sonora's political elites during the course of the nineteenth century and reveals important similarities to developments near the national capital. The Yaqui perceived themselves not as Mexican citizens but as members of a distinct nation. Their nationality was defined by rights to govern themselves and to control their homelands along the fertile Yaqui valley. Immediately after independence, local elites attempted to assert newly claimed state power and to deny those traditional Yaqui rights, thus setting off the Banderas rebellions of the late 1820s and early 1830s. Those uprisings were suppressed, but in their aftermath, Yaqui leaders forged political links with the local conservatives led by Manuel Gándara. This alliance of an indigenous nation with conservative elites ruled state politics in Sonora for decades beginning in the 1830s and helped to preserve Yaqui lands and self-rule.

On the northern frontier, as in the central highlands, the national triumph of the liberals in the 1850s and 1860s accelerated the process of undermining the indigeneous communities' traditional rights to land and local rule. The result in Sonora was another round of rebellion (led by the famous Cajeme), continuing guerrilla conflicts, military repression, and eventually the deportation of many Yaqui to work in distant Yucatán. Hu-DeHart's analysis of Sonora parallels Lira's study of greater Mexico City in revealing that political conservatives were ready in the 1830s to collaborate with Indian leaders—if only for political advantage—while liberals worked persistently to undermine the corporate rights of native Mexicans and used force to try to contain the inevitable protests. These studies indicate that historians should no longer view the nineteenth-century political disputes between elite conservatives and elite liberals as limited to issues of centralism versus federalism and the role of the church. Those who fought for political control of the new Mexican nation also held conflicting visions of the role of the indigenous peasantry in national life—issues of fundamental social consequence.

Manuel Lozada was the dominant political leader in Nayarit, a mountainous region near the coast northwest of Guadalajara, from the 1850s until he was executed in 1873. A staunch defender of the rights of indigenous communities, he also allied with conservatives in fighting the liberals who attained national predominance during the era of his

regional rule. Historians are still awaiting an analysis of Lozada and his relations with the people of Nayarit as thorough as Lira's work on the Federal District and Hu-DeHart's study of Sonora. But two recent studies bring us substantially closer to understanding Lozada and his movement.

Esperando a Lozada, by Jean Meyer, is a collection of essays primarily focused on exploring the social context of west-central Mexico, where Lozada's movement developed. Meyer's studies bring new perspectives on the development and implementation of liberal policies against community landholding in Jalisco and Nayarit while also emphasizing peasant opposition and periodic revolts of protest. Other essays discuss the rise of the region's predominant commercial house of Barron and Forbes and briefly discuss Lozada's political career. Meyer's essays provide another regional perspective on liberal policies and peasant reactions, which again included alliances with political conservatives.

Mario Alfonso Aldana Rendón's *Rebelión agraria de Manuel Lozada* confirms the agrarian base of Lozada's regional power. This work provides far more detail than Meyer's on the complex political developments that first allowed Lozada to rule in Nayarit from 1867 to 1872 (despite liberal national power) and then led to his destruction in 1873. Until a more thorough work appears, a good understanding of Lozada can emerge from combining Meyer's solid analysis of the regional socio-economic context with Aldana's detailed discussion of political developments. The two works together make clear the pivotal role of Lozada as an agrarian leader with conservative allies.

The political alliances between indigenous communities and conservatives in the Federal District, Nayarit, and Sonora during the decades from the 1830s to 1860 suggest interpretations that deserve additional study. First, it appears that the poor and generally rural majority of Mexicans—or at least their community leaders—were more aware than has been generally thought of political developments during the postindependence decades, a perspective that allowed them to forge political alliances appearing most favorable to their interests. It seems that the ultimate defeat of the conservatives and their elimination from the political arena in 1867 led agrarian leaders defending community rights to seek alliances with more radical ideologues. Leticia Reina's materials on the widespread rural uprisings of 1868 and 1869 indicate that they were the first in which radical leaders played leading roles.

Thus developed the oft-noted paradox of Mexican agrarian politics. Peasant villagers, ultimately conservative in their struggles to preserve traditional, community-based ways of life, became by the late nineteenth century political allies of radicals with anarchist or socialist visions. The point may be that peasants were neither political conserva-

tives nor anarchists nor socialists. They were community peasants aware that their way of life was under assault from liberals and that allies were essential. Cooperation with conservatives helped preserve community rights into the liberal era. But once the liberals triumphed, peasants were left without established allies. They thus tended to shift toward leaders viewed as radical in national political life. To elites and ideologues, that shift might appear inconsistent; to villagers, it was a necessary adaptation. Nineteenth-century Mexican peasants demonstrated an ability to seek their own goals through whatever alliances were possible in a changing political environment.

Allen Wells's study, *Yucatán's Gilded Age*, is a fine analysis of the evolution of agrarian society in one Mexican region during the late-nineteenth-century era of liberal dominance. At the level of state policies and regional economic developments, Yucatán exhibited everything to be expected of the liberal era: rapid economic growth led by an export commodity (in this case, henequen); government assistance to rail construction facilitating export production; state policies that favored landed elites in estate building and labor relations; and thus a boom that generated unprecedented wealth, concentrated it in the hands of a few economically and politically favored families, and left the working majority desperately poor and politically excluded.

What makes *Yucatán's Gilded Age* especially significant is its detailed exploration of the resulting rural social relations, which led more to quiet acquiescence than to violent protest by the rural majority. The Maya's strong opposition to liberal policies fueled the Caste War that began in the 1840s, and their bondage and exploitation symbolized the worst of late-nineteenth-century developments described in John Kenneth Turner's *Barbarous Mexico*. Yet they did not participate in the revolutionary insurrections that broke out across Mexico beginning in 1910. Why no revolution occurred from below in Yucatán is a crucial question that Wells addresses.

He emphasizes that the wealth and unity of the regional elite led by Olegario Molina, along with the weakness of peasant organization and leadership, worked to preserve social peace in Yucatán. But was Molina's regime in Yucatán really stronger than the Terrazas machine that fell in Chihuahua in the face of insurrections in 1910?² Were the Maya, who were so capable of organizing and sustaining an insurrection in the 1840s and 1850s, suddenly that incapable by 1910?

Strong, united elites and weakened peasant organization surely helped in limiting agrarian revolt in Yucatán after 1910. But Wells's detailed discussion of agrarian social relations there, when viewed in comparative perspective, suggests more fundamental reasons. In Yucatán, as elsewhere in Mexico, rural families lost access to lands and came to rely increasingly on estates during the Díaz era. In most regions, the

haciendas offered the dependent poor only sharecropping on marginal lands, seasonal fieldwork, or a combination of both—all situations of great insecurity. In contrast, the henequen estates of Yucatán required many workers year round. Laborers were in such demand that employers used combinations of debt and state power to force the Maya to work. Moreover, elites used part of their export earnings to import maize, thus providing a basic, but minimal, subsistence for their workers.

Wells's study makes clear that the Maya producing the henequen that enriched the elites of Yucatán were extremely poor, coerced, and exploited. His analysis also shows that many found minimal security on the plantations. Maya were forced to labor long hours for low pay, but their labor was crucial enough to the regional elite's wealth that the latter provided for the workers' basic survival. In Mexico as elsewhere, security—even accompanied by coercion and cruelty—has generally diminished rebelliousness, while deep insecurity has contributed to mounting social protests.³ Wells's book is perhaps most important for revealing the social consequences of the henequen boom in such detail. It will stimulate and facilitate cross-regional comparative analyses.

The studies discussed here facilitate understanding the politics of social change in nineteenth-century Mexico. They confirm the emerging perception that this century was an era of pivotal social transformation in Mexico—and that politics were central to those developments. Scholars can no longer treat the century after independence as a chaotic parenthesis in which Mexicans marked time between colonial origins and revolutionary conflicts and resolutions. The politics of the nineteenth century were fundamental to the collapse of the colonial order and to provoking the social conflicts underlying the twentieth-century revolution. The works reviewed here suggest that a new trend of Mexican historiography, focusing on the sociopolitical history of the nineteenth century, is well underway. It should persist and prosper.

NOTES

1. On state autonomy, see Nicos Poulantzas, *Political Power and Social Classes*, translated by Timothy O'Hagan (London: New Left, 1973); on Mexico, see Nora Hamilton, *The Limits of State Autonomy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982). On the mediation of the colonial state, see William Taylor, *Drinking, Homicide, and Rebellion in Colonial Mexican Villages* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1979); and Woodrow Borah, *Justice by Insurance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983).
2. For comparison, see Mark Wasserman, *Capitalists, Caciques, and Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984).
3. For comparisons across Mexico, see John Tutino, *From Insurrection to Revolution in Mexico* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986); on the importance of peasant security and insecurity in Southeast Asia, see James Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976).