



COMMENTARIES

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I

The study of Mexican history represents a paradox. Few peoples in Spanish America have been scrutinized with the care lavished on Mexicans, yet the history of Mexico, particularly since independence, reveals gaps not only in chronology but in the carefully and analytical examination of social phenomena at almost every stage. A mere handful of historians has taken the time to study the campesino, the class structure, or urbanization on the eve of the Revolution, the most singular event of the last century.

In their papers, both Frederick C. Turner and Jean A. Meyer stress this obvious absence of research, and its implications for a knowledge of what really transpired in Mexican history. To fill the gaps and to expand the horizons of knowledge, Turner writes about the necessity to study Mexican history by comparing it with others, that is by the comparative method. In defense of his plea, he argues, and rightly so, that the end is not the “misleading dogma of universality”—a quote he has taken from Samuel Beer— but that the comparative approach “might lead to better understanding of both social processes and specific historical situations”. In addition, he advocates, among a variety of approaches, the use of “historical sociology” which, in reality, is a principal theme of his paper: the need of both historian and sociologist to employ each others disciplines.

Turner stresses the reliance on historical sociology because he believes that the study of Mexican society lends itself to that method. He emphasizes the relative isolation of the country and the extensive documentation available for its study as important reasons for his view. As he points out, geography isolated the Mexican community over a long period of time, and thus only a number of “extraneous variables” influenced it, while the transformations that have modified geographical limitations in recent years permit the scholar to analyze the factors that encourage change.

Turner’s suggestions are both sound and provocative. Mexican history, indeed, has been both studied intensively and neglected. Much is known about the course of historical development in Mexico, but few attempts at theoretical analysis are available. When Turner argues that much can be learned about the nature of the Mexican Revolution of 1910 if Crane Brinton’s theories are applied to it, he stands on solid grounds. Not only will the comparative method shed new light, but Brinton’s suppositions, gleaned from his study of the French, American, English, and Russian revolutions, aid the scholar to understand the character of the Porfirista regime, as well as the basic nature of nineteenth century Mexico.

Brinton's labors represent one source. Much more lies close at hand to the historian who seeks fresh insights and perspectives into the Mexican Revolution. On the subject of man's protests against tyrannical regimes a wealth of information awaits the imaginative student. One has merely to turn to "Brinton's bibliography, in a book published approximately thirty years ago, to learn how much had been done on the subject then. Today studies of the revolutionary process literally pour from the presses. Among the new works that help the scholar to focus a new on the upheaval of 1910 is Chalmers Johnson's *Revolutionary Change* which adds a new dimension to earlier contributions. Even the polemical tract authored by Regis Debray, *Revolution in Revolution*, may steer the scholar towards a better comprehension of the events of 1910-1917.

Since the Revolution, in the standard mythology that passes for the true version, stands as an agrarian uprising in which land-hungry peasants played a leading role, why not employ for purposes of comparison and analysis the challenging thesis advanced by Barrington Moore in his justly controversial *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*? No book that discusses peasant involvement in political protests can ignore Moore's sections dealing with the question of why peasants rebel. His interpretation may compel the scholar to rethink —and perhaps to deemphasize?— the significance of the peasant's participation in the Mexican upheaval of 1910, a view, that in my opinion, cries for recognition. George Foster, an anthropologist whose interpretations are questioned by Turner, may well be correct in his assumption that the Revolution had little impact on the peasants (*campesinos*?) of Tzintzuntzan.

All of this can be accomplished —to move historical studies of Mexico to a higher theoretical plane— because, as Turner believes, enough of the groundwork has been done to provide for profitable use of theory. That, in turn, should point the way to new directions in research and to the collections of empirical data that will either support theory or indicate fresh theoretical possibilities. The collection of data, the activity that leads to the preparation of the narrow monograph, goes hand in glove with the attempt at generalization based on the use of theory. The two complement each other; at this stage of Mexican research, one need not wait for the other.

Comparing the Mexican Revolution with other movements offers additional advantages. It helps to define more precisely the nebulous term "revolution", which scholars of Mexico interpret loosely. Succinctly, what makes up the revolutionary process? In their study of Mexico since 1910, scholars, particularly Northamericans, often prostitute the term. To accept what may well represent the majority version, itself a reflection of the political conservatism of historical scholarship in the United States since the end of World War II (interpretations now under heavy attack from the revisionists), is to believe that Mexico has enjoyed a revolution for nearly sixty years. That is historically impossible! No revolutionary process, if revolution means drastic and violent socio-economic change, can endure for long. Societies simply will not suffer unstable conditions for more than brief periods; too quickly the people yearn for a return to peace, stability, and order, conditions that are the antithesis of revolution. If the

Mexican Revolution survives, it is unique to the experience of mankind on this earth while the Mexican is a rare breed of animal found only in that region lying between the Río Bravo in the north and Guatemala to the south. And that, as any study of the species man in Mexico amply demonstrates, is untrue.

The confusion stems from the misleading interpretation applied to the term revolution. Proponents of the "continuing revolution" thesis, that credo of PRI politicians since the days of Ávila Camacho, confuse evolutionary middle-class change, which may or not be reform, with revolution. If attention were paid to France in the years after its justly famous revolution, or to Russia in its post-revolutionary era, perhaps the question of whether or not the Mexican Revolution survives 1917 (or 1940?) might not exist. Because, if Mexico suffered a revolution in the true sense of that term—violent and drastic socio-economic upheaval—that condition ended long before the 1920's disappeared into the past. That President Cárdenas carried on an extensive program of social change does not necessarily demonstrate that he either continued or revived the movement launched by Madero and brought to fruition in the Constitution of 1917. Why not speak of a Cardenista revolution, separate and distinct from the earlier upheaval, which had long ago collapsed if land distribution statistics provide an index to change in Mexico? Cardenistas spoke for a new generation that, with some exceptions, had only indirectly or in secondary roles participated in the crusade that began in 1910. Certainly, the Mexico of 1935 bore little resemblance to the nation of Zapata and Villa or even Obregón.

Of course, none of this denies the necessity to keep firmly in mind the "uniqueness" of the Mexican experience. Turner rightly reminds us of the validity of Eric Wolfe's admonition that the "realities of class structure and relationships in Mexico . . . differ radically from the European prototypes . . ." Still, granted the need to recall that Mexico is Mexico, comparisons with foreign models can stimulate the historian to formulate not only fresh views of Mexican history but distinct approaches to its study. If care is taken to bear in mind obvious differences, no harm can come from the use of outside experience to measure and evaluate Mexican development.

II

Perhaps, if the student of Mexico had employed the comparative method more frequently, Jean A. Meyer might have had answers to many of the questions he asks. Further, he might have questioned some of the assumptions he takes for granted. After all, was the nineteenth century in Mexico the age of rural conflict? Is the Mexican Revolution of 1910 the "first rural revolution in Latin America?" Why not ask if that upheaval was indeed a "rural revolution?"

Yet these questions are asked, not merely because the study of rural Mexico in the past century is in its "infancy", but because most of the popular assumptions (stereotypes) of Mexican history seldom confront

serious challenges. What passes for Mexican social history in the age of Mora, Juárez, and Díaz lies mired in a cycle without end. The absence of careful monographic investigations leaves intact old views that may not stand the light of scrutiny, while the lack of new theories applicable to the era discourage revisionist scholarship.

Much of this, as Meyer recognizes, applies to the Mexican Revolution. We know something about the heroes of the strife —what historian cannot describe Zapata?— although almost nothing of their followers. Villa represents a classic case illustrating the inconsistency of research. On Villa, books and articles galore lie in libraries; but who investigates the character of his followers? Who were the men of the *División del Norte*? Peasants? Where these peasants —or campesinos?— identical to the men who farmed the hacienda lands of the central and southern zones? Might not Villa's army, as a few scholars have suggested, speak for the small-town proletariat of the north, a group that because of its *ambiente* and resulting goals and beliefs, differs radically from the followers of a Zapata or a Buelna —a point raised by Meyer when he speaks of the importance of background to the understanding of individuals and groups?

Of the questions formulated by Meyer, that of greatest implications centers on the causes of rebellion, both in the nineteenth century as well as of the Revolution. Who, he asks, was responsible for the protest? Who took the initiative in forming an active opposition? Applied to the Revolution, the question invites further examination of the premise that peasant unrest underlies rural protest. Did the peasants revolt every where in 1910, or only in certain geographical zones? Morelos, for example? If only in Morelos and other isolated spots, why? Or did peasant uprisings, if indeed any existed, correspond to the challenge of individual leadership? Or to economic changes that had transformed the peasant into an agricultural wage laborer? These questions, says Meyer, have not been answered and, often, not even asked.

Unfortunately, in terms of the Revolution of 1910, these vital questions cannot be answered until more information is available. To cite Meyers again, studies of the haciendas of nineteenth-century Mexico are needed, studies that would analyze by regions the institutions, especially in order to see whether the hacienda is one or many types, and whether or not it suffered transformations in the years between independence and 1910. Did the introduction of capitalism and trade ties with industrial Europe and the United States alter the pattern of the colonial haciendas, and with that transformation the role of the peasants on them? If changes took place, which of them encouraged the peasant activity that led to the Revolution? Until we know more about these aspects of socio-economic history, Meyer correctly insists, much political phenomena cannot be understood or brought to light. For example, why did peasant unrest fail either to spread throughout the Mexico of 1910 or to capture the Revolution —if peasant unrest truly characterized Porfirista Mexico? Why did a so-called agrarian revolution not produce meaningful agrarian reform until 1935, and then under circumstances that cast doubt on the survival of the movement launched in 1910?

Might not the campesino, as Meyer suggests, represent as much the

“reaction” to (as in the Huasteca?) as the “best allies” of the revolutionaries? That the Revolution never advanced much beyond the “bourgeois” stage may be traced to the fact that it was basically impossible to politicize illiterate rural masses, except in places such as Morelos where the introduction of railroads and a modern sugar system tied to export markets wrought profound changes?

Clearly, the theories advanced above, the questions posed, represent only a variety of possible explanations for the historical phenomena of the time. All are tentative. To affirm them categorically as true cannot be done because the spadework remains unfinished. Yet the total picture of Mexican development, in a social as well as a political sense, awaits the bold pioneer who will both “dig” out the facts as well as interpret the large currents. In that task he can expect that history by comparison and by *theoretical* analysis will open new and exciting avenues of thought.