



COMMENTARY

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We have before us two papers which might be called reflections on the human condition in its special effects upon the sub-sub-variety called historian. The papers are highly disparate, yet they mesh in a rather odd way. That by Dr. Romeo Flores Caballero deals with the problems of historical research in a country that for historians is still under-developed in the organization of its archives, in the endowment of public libraries, and in the training and numbers of its personnel. Under-development means lack of facilities, inadequate provision for scholars, and steady wastage as students and scholars re-do work already done because they do not have access to bibliographies and libraries. Dr. Flores Caballero mentions advances that have been made in provision and training of scholars, and points to a remedy, namely, better marshalling of resources and, even more, persuading private enterprises to make more efficient use of their benefactions by improving existing public facilities rather than creating numbers of private ones. All that Dr. Flores Caballero has to say is true although I am led to reflect that Mexico, despite a continuing and profligate destruction of its records that can perhaps best be compared with our own gutting of the resources of an entire continent, still remains the possessor of vast archival wealth.

The paper by Dr. Marvin Bernstein shows the reverse picture, the generally rich endowment and ample provision of an affluent society, even though despite affluence there are some minor complaints such as the need for students and scholars on field trips to live in something less than the comfort that they are used to at home. Yet—and an odd aspect—the ability to assemble materials in the form of books, manuscripts, and photocopies of all kinds has led to a peculiar dispersal and disorder, for without adequate indexes to what is available and where, especially for photocopies, students and scholars are unable to make adequate use of, let alone master, the materials they need. If one adds to this statement what Dr. Bernstein does not mention, the increasing pressure upon facilities in the United States, one is left with a picture of increasing disorder as wealth multiplies, and so in the United States as in Mexico, scholars are forced in the end to build private libraries and so we return to “la forma más primitiva de desarrollo bibliotecario de un país.” Dr. Bernstein points at some length to the creation of guides and indexes that are helping to solve some of the disorder, and all that he has to say is true, but again I am led to reflect that neither in the United States nor in Mexico has there been written a general guide to the sources for the history of Mexico comparable to the extraordinarily useful manual of Raúl Porrás Barrenechea, *Fuentes históricas peruanas*. Both Dr. Flores Caballero and Dr. Bernstein in their suggestions for remedies approach the idea of central direction and central

ordering although Dr. Bernstein, on a perhaps closer look at the remedy, enters a hasty caveat. I should add in justice to both papers that, in addition to the elements I have indicated, they cover many other aspects of difficulties in research and training.

I both agree and disagree with the two papers. The problems and difficulties they point to are very real and very much with us in the two countries. Nevertheless, from an experience as student and perhaps scholar that reaches back to the middle 1930's, I do think that there has been considerable change for the better. When I first visited Mexico in 1938, I remember the far more meager endowment of facilities for scholars and the far greater sacrifice that dedication to historical research then meant. Dr. Flores Caballero's paper itself mentions, for example, the contributions of El Colegio de México, and the various entities of the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, including the Centro de Documentación and its notable labor of preserving local records by a beneficent seizure on microfilm. One may point to the remarkable growth of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, the creation of the Instituto de Investigaciones Históricas, and the rise of state universities. There is far more historical research and I have the impression that much of it is of the quality that only a small proportion of work done earlier attained. In the United States, I can recall the range and quality of instruction and published research of the 1930's and compare it with somewhat more thoughtful offerings, oral and written, today. Charles Gibson's careful summary of work done in Latin American history since 1904, especially in the United States, in his *Spain in America*, is a heartening testimony, for his summary shows substantial advance in range of question and examination of older questions. Perhaps most encouraging is the fact that the overwhelming bulk of the contribution has been by relatively small accretion. The extent of support for students and scholars in the United States, even for us troglodytes in history, has become far more generous and at times munificent. It may have reached the point of bringing us to a standard of living that hampers study and reflection, or even worse leads us to shy away from thoughts that might imperil the flow of funds.

Let me come now to those problems that are common to the condition of historian in general, rather than to people in the United States and México who study Mexican history. Much in the two papers really relates to these latter but much is really a complaint on the human condition. I refer especially to statements on problems of training, of selecting topics, and of carrying out certain kinds of work such as inquiries that may use statistics. Here I think one must distinguish among the uses of history and the kinds of history, and here there is a marked difference between the United States and Mexico, for in the United States higher productivity and automation create a need to absorb into suitable activities, population that would otherwise be redundant. Among such activities, the pursuit of history is a decorous and favorite choice. México with its lesser degree of industrialization has yet to reach this need. As to the kinds and uses of history, one must distinguish among a number each of which imposes its own requirements. Much of what is complained of in the two papers is apprentice work, the necessary training exercises that teach students the

nature of materials and the techniques of inquiry. To ask that these exercises advance collective knowledge is to set a high goal indeed that can be reached only occasionally. A great deal more of historical writing represents what I should call the renewal of national myth and of items of popular entertainment. It is generally true that much of such writing is best called artful repetition, but it is equally true that such affirmation in a perhaps slightly updated idiom seems to be a matter of national demand as to myth and of popular need in the materials of public entertainment. There is in the latter a demand for something that can be called new even if it is not and for the kind of updating that will substitute for the biographies of saints those of revolutionary heroes in accordance with changes in taste.

There is indeed a category of new work, that is research that genuinely moves to something different, but such research depends either upon the uncovering of new materials, the development of a new point of view, or the use of new techniques of treatment. These do not spring to the hands of multitudes.

This category of new work, because it does mean moving beyond established lines, has in it the normal human problems of arriving at adequate formulation of concepts, methods, and questions—the age—old human difficulties as we try to encompass within our own understanding a vastly complex and puzzling universe. Furthermore, we are led to demand of the relatively limited materials of past years the answers to questions we now formulate on the basis of conceptions of new kinds of gathering. The vessel frequently cannot take the pressure, and yet oddly enough, handled with some care, can take a good deal more than most scholars think.

At this point I should perhaps give a word of encouragement in that the problems in statistics that Dr. Bernstein points to need upset us less than one might think. The undercount in the Mexican census of 1921 added an error of less than 10 percent, and can easily be handled by known techniques of adjustment from earlier and later counts. The other censuses in turn, by the way, contain margins of error as do all censuses. As for data on imports and exports, the problems in Mexican statistics are no worse than those in the statistics of most countries, and hardly worse than those in data on movement of specie. The truth is that all data, statistics included, have their problems, and we work with greater or lesser margins of error. The important thing is to be aware that we do and not to commit the idiocies of one man who translated the depth of a harbor from meters into feet and inches to the fourth decimal place and so reached a statement that became inaccurate every time a few grains of sand moved on the bottom. In the end, in most research, we do not see all of the material or we never get down to writing, and what material we do see is pervaded with various kinds of error and bias. Our defence is to resort to sampling techniques of various kinds. Sampling techniques is frequently applied to quantitative data; it can be applied to materials of a qualitative nature, especially if the points of view and interests can be sorted out. That means that our search in archives is not to see all but to get adequate samples. Beyond that most masses of documents tend to repeat themselves.

A major problem not put forth in either paper is the need to make available to students and scholars more time for reflection and to decrease

the amount of writing they do. What we need is more concise and meaningful writing, that is the elimination in historical writing, except for the tasteful reassertion of myth and popular tale, of writing which has little to say. Today most people write books to convey a few additional points or a suggestion for another interpretation when a few pages would handle the matter fully and well. What are published as articles could better be handled by the learned note of a few paragraphs. That kind of change would require far greater emphasis on quality and disapproval of quantity unless the number of printed pages clearly justified their existence. With the time for reflection thus made available, we in the United States could profit more fully from our studies in Mexico, which have the inestimable benefit of immersing us in another culture and so of enriching our personalities and our existence. For Mexico, with its different conditions, the benefits might come more slowly. They will show up more rapidly as historical inquiry in Mexico expands beyond national history to other countries, a phenomenon that is now well under way.