



www.senado2010.gob.mx

www.juridicas.unam.mx

COMMENTARY

HOWARD F. CLINE

The two papers by Professors Flores Caballero and Bernstein, plus the comments by Professor Borah, collectively pose baffling problems for one like me who has been assigned to make further formal comments. In each instance we have a fascinating and informative individual contribution that merits serious consideration. At the same time they seem unrelated to one another or to some general topic. Originally the planners of this Third Meeting had hoped that this session would address itself to some *common* problems faced by students of Mexican history, whether in Mexico, the United States, or Europe, with discussions revolving about some of the professional and intellectual problems inherent in such historiography. Generally speaking, however, our three documents here have in common only the delineation of disparate socio-economic problems that require administrative and political decisions and solution beyond the power of our *small and unorganized* band of professional historians here to make, or even influence to any real degree.

Perhaps we can take as axiomatic that at the present, and in the foreseeable future, the historiography of Mexico will continue to operate within the *economics of poverty, not of affluence*. Improvements will come incrementally, not by quantum jumps. This approach applies even more specifically to developments in the indispensable auxiliaries, libraries, archives, research centers. As Dr. Flores Caballero cogently and correctly points out, growing demands on public funds in Mexico consistently outstrip available fiscal resources. Support for intellectual enterprises in general, and for historiography and its infrastructures in particular, traditionally have occupied and probably will retain a low national priority. As all of us agree, there has been improvement in these matters in Mexico over three decades, quantitative and qualitative, seen in expanded facilities and in more and better historical studies. I would hope and expect such advances to continue, but at their present evolutionary, not a revolutionary pace. Compared to conditions in some other Latin American countries, Ecuador, Bolivia, Venezuela, for instance, conditions for carrying on historical studies in Mexico are very favorable indeed.

Dr. Flores Caballero also mentioned that many of the same obstacles to historical research seen in Mexico are also found in the United States. I would like to extend slightly his carefully worded statement on this matter. Both my colleagues from the United States have mentioned our purported *affluence*, but I should like to stress here that the historians as a group have shared in it to a very limited degree. Even that relatively "Golden Age" of the past decade or so is drawing abruptly to a close. Dr. Bernstein has correctly indicated that the United States Government has been a relatively negligible factor in the support of any historical studies, let alone those dedicated especially to Mexico. The National Science Foundation, a major official

national element in aiding scientific research, has never supported historical studies, the only exception being history of science. The defense establishment, which has made research money available to selected social sciences for what is essentially applied research, has had and manifests no interest in professional historiography except of its own past. The National Endowment for the Humanities, although headed by an historian, has a very small annual budget, and in its brief existence has been able to do little for the study of foreign cultures, inundated as it has been with applications for funds to carry on investigations of our own national history.

Much of the burden in the United States of supporting research abroad, or investigations concerning foreign cultures, thus has traditionally been borne by the private sector, notably the major foundations. Especially significant was the entrance of the Ford Foundation into this arena. Its several Latin American programs got under way about 1960, but for all intents and purposes they have now been closed out. From previous expenditures that hovered around \$ 21 million a year, the figure for all Latin American undertakings has dropped to around \$ 4 million, and this reduced sum is restricted to programs on recent and contemporary problems, carried on by its own personnel. But even in the recent heyday of its aid, the Ford Foundation normally eschewed (with minor exceptions) direct support to working historians. It did in 1964 provide the Conference on Latin American History, our professional association, with a small grant of \$ 125,000 which permitted it to undertake preparation of things like the Charles Griffin *Guide to the Historical Literature of Latin America* and other generally useful tools. But Ford Foundation renewal funds were not forthcoming last year to publish them. In this connection it might be worth noting, in line with Borah's implied and useful suggestion that needed for improvement of Mexican historical studies is a manual like Porras Barrenechea *Fuentes Históricas Peruanas*, that the Griffin *Guide* which attempts to provide such coverage for the historical literature of Latin America as a whole, required about \$ 100,000, including costs of publication, and that such sums are now no longer available from United States sources. In short the so-called affluence was never very great, and it was short-lived.

Rather than being depressed at the thought that we may now again be driven back on the small individual resources we can muster among ourselves, I tend to be calm, and even perhaps relieved. Rather than indulging in some of the gamesmanship and grantsmanship to which Professor Bernstein alludes, both students and their mentors may well be forced to think more clearly about the main business of historical scholarship: to find significant problems and to bring personal ingenuity and dogged persistence to bear in solving them. In this new intellectual Darwinism that has already begun, the fittest will survive. We shall fortunately reduce the number of marginal figures who invade México and perform disgracefully in archives and libraries in the manner Professor Flores Caballero describes so restrainedly in the closing paragraphs of his paper. I might add that they often act much the same in U.S. repositories, where they are equally arrogant and demanding.

In short, we are more and more directly facing an enforced academic birth control situation. Our planned families of young scholars may well

be the better for facing some of the austerities that many of us took for granted in the far-off days when young people actually paid to go to graduate school. Their seniors, too, may be forced to sharpen their own pencils.

Thus I foresee that some if not most of the redundant population whom Professor Borah views as becoming academic historians of Mexico merely because it is a decorous activity is likely to emigrate to greener scholarly pastures, and God-speed. The hardy band that survives in Mexico, the United States, and elsewhere will find many useful things to do, often capable of accomplishment without much more investment than personal dedication, and a willingness to help one another. I have been struck by the fact that the Brazilianists, who mushroomed in number far beyond the telephone-boothful mentioned by Professor Bernstein, created within an academic generation a remarkable group of young scholars. Among other things these graduate students and recent Ph.D. degree recipients cooperated to produce a field guide to Brazil which covers many of the practical aspects of pursuing historical work there, such as how to cash a check, as well as invaluable notes on archives and other scholarly resources, based on their own recent personal experience. Such a compilation for Mexico, brought together by our young people, in cooperation with their Mexican peers, might well improve the efficient use of valuable scholarly time by all.

At least two problems mentioned by my North American colleagues are likely to diminish, if my estimate has any validity. Dr. Borah notes that the financial support available to historians in the United States in the past few years "has 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 thought that might imperil the flow of funds". We are past that era already. Apparently it will take a little time to see if the quality of writing improves now that lack of munificence will automatically provide enforced leisure and time for reflection. But I think that the time for study and reflection is not something we see as a problem, but rather something that we now should welcome and must be prepared to live with.

Dr. Bernstein in passing mentions a problem, also touched on peripherally by Professors Flores Caballero and Borah, that concerns us all, and to which there are no ready answers. It concerns the increasing amount of research materials becoming available and a wastage of scarce human resources by duplicated research, in the face of dwindling financial support, seemingly calling for some mechanisms providing central direction and central ordering of scarce human resources. I am not quite sure of Professor Bernstein's position on these matters, nor how to interpret his statement that "it is impossible to pontificate on intellectual freedom and arrive at the conclusion that given a policy of *laissez-faire* in the choice of topics, a sort of invisible hand will guide us to the greatest benefit for all mankind and the best of all possible worlds". I do not know if he believes in such invisible hand, or if he does, whether he favors *laissez-faire* or some planning. In discussing the proposed plans of the Latin American Studies Association for some rationalization of these matters, he says it appears to him "that the field of Latin American studies is moving toward over-orga-

nization which, through its influence over many sources of funds, would stress and steer researchers into areas favored by an in-group. Over-bureaucratization can be counter-productive". This requires comment.

In the first place, I think the kind and degree of coordinating activity proposed by the Association is rather different from those implied in this statement. So far as I know, there is absolutely no intention of imposing some monstrous Politbureau plan worked out by a secret elite to direct scholarly lives. This attempt would not only be unwise, but wholly impossible within the academic community as now constituted. This is a bogus issue. The Association's role is to aid, not control research. For it as for us here the problem obviously becomes one of devising or suggesting the means to overcome as a group certain common problems that seemingly are beyond the abilities of an individual scholar to solve.

It is, of course, to these latter problems that this Session was presumably dedicated. Some of the assumptions on which discussion can fruitfully be based include the proposition that history and its writing is a house of many mansions, and historiography thrives within a pluralistic intellectual universe where no single orthodoxy (except a sincere search for historical truth) dominates. Infinite are the combinations of materials, techniques, and frames of reference which may be legitimately employed to write history. No one general program could hope to provide each researcher with all the source materials he needs, or even information on where to find them. However, as Dr. Borah correctly notes, no one ever sees everything he needs. We all do the best we can with what we have, but there are general improvements that reasonably can be discussed.

One is greater accessibility to materials, both in the United States and in Mexico. This poses less problem to the colonialist than to the specialist in the national period, where it grows more acute in almost geometric proportion by years from the turn of the twentieth century, and is often insuperable for recent times. This unavailability of sources applies not only to the personal papers of important or even lesser individuals mentioned by our speakers, but is particularly serious for records in public but bureaucratic hands. One group of such records of special interest and concern relates to various joint enterprises undertaken by the United States and Mexican government; neither side can or will release them to scholarly eyes without permission from the other partner, normally nearly impossible to obtain. In both countries access to diplomatic papers seems much more difficult and complicated than any real or assumed threat to national security justifies, but I am at a loss to suggest any viable solution to the problem.

In mentioning the problem of sources for recent and contemporary history, I should like to enter a caveat against the unbridled and often witless use of oral history techniques mentioned by Dr. Bernstein. I do not refer to the carefully controlled approach by Dr. Wilkie and some others. I do deplore the growing notion that a North American graduate student barely fluent in English, let alone Spanish, can be turned loose on busy Mexican nationals with a tape-recorder and the conviction that it somehow replaces dreary archival research and that they have an obligation to be interviewed.

Obviously a catalog of gaps and barriers to particular research can be augmented infinitely by each researcher. However, despite them I should like to echo the muted notes of optimism sounded by three scholars whose remarks I have reviewed. Even in the face of inadequate financing, scattered and intractable source materials, and the other drawbacks, a very respectable body of Mexican history is being written by capable historians in many lands. Its quantity and quality need no extended apology.