The Mexican Revolution

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In terms of its scope and sophistication, the writing of the history of Mexico is some way behind the historiography of, say, Western Europe, but ahead of most other Latin American countries. But it is progressing fast, thanks to the combined efforts of Mexican historians (especially a generation of young scholars who, since the 1960s, have produced a rich crop of research); of a small, select group of Europeans who work on Mexico; and of a much larger North American contingent, the raw recruits of which – I refer to the annual cohort of PhD students – bear down on Mexico City from the north like some academic equivalent of Pancho Villa’s fearsome División del Norte. Mexican historiography is therefore lively and expanding; it is rich in topics and archives (the organisation of which is also fast improving); and, if much of the best recent work has focused on the colonial period, especially the eighteenth century, it is not surprising that the Mexican Revolution – the great popular and political upheaval which began in 1910 and which laid the foundations of modern Mexico – has also been the subject of much valuable research and debate.

Of course, the Revolution has been a subject of study since its inception. But during the first generation or so after the Revolution (which, in its violent form, may be said to have terminated circa 1920) the writing of its history was dominated by active participants: generals, políticos and intellectuals who penned memoirs and accounts, some of considerable value, most highly partisan, which thus served as grist to the mill of revolutionary mythology – official or individual. More ‘scholarly’ work was done by North American historians/sociologists like Ernest Gruening (Mexico and its Heritage, Stanley Paul & Co, New York, 1928) and Frank Tanenbaum (The Mexican Agrarian Revolution, Brookings Institute, Washington, 1929). But they, too, entertained strong – usually favourable – views about the Revolution, and their collective vision of a popular, agrarian revolution, though it fitted well enough with official Mexican thinking, has recently been the subject of stringent revisionist criticism (a good deal of it, I would suggest, misplaced).

By the 1950s, ‘scholarly’ history – written by professionals, based on archival research and at least claiming a certain detached objectivity – began to proliferate, especially in the United States. Charles C. Cumberland’s The Mexican Revolution Genesis Under Madero (University of Texas Press, 1952, reprinted 1974), a full, intelligent account of the early, liberal phase of the Revolution (1910-13), was soon complemented by Stanley R. Ross, Francisco I. Madero: Apostle of Mexican Democracy (Columbia University Press, 1955); together, these remain the best English-language political histories of the first phase of the Revolution. Cumberland’s volume was (after a long pause) followed by an even better sequel: The Mexican Revolution: The Constitutionalist Years (University of Texas Press, 1972), a survey of the years 1913-20 which has still not been bettered (in English; readers of Spanish, however, have
the benefit of the excellent new series published by the Colegio de México, Historia de la Revolución Mexicana, which covers the 1910-60 period in twenty-three illustrated, multi-authored volumes, the first nine of which deal with 1910-24. Apart from this significant exception, I shall refrain from citing works available only in Spanish. Meanwhile, conventional political histories came thick and fast, especially in the US. Robert E. Quirk produced three: The Mexican Revolution 1914-15, The Convention of Aquascalientes (Indiana University Press, 1960); An Affair of Honor: Woodrow Wilson and the Occupation of Vera- cruz (W.W. Norton, 1967) — a neat opusculum; and The Mexican Revolution and the Catholic Church (Indiana University Press, 1973) — which somehow left the field of the press, since it coincided with Jean Meyer’s massive, revisionist study of this subject. E.V. Niemeyer, Revolution at Querétaro: The Mexican Constitutional Convention of 1916-17 (University of Texas Press, 1974) tackled an important subject in ponderous style. Biographies also multiplied. William E. Sherman and Richard E. Greenleaf, Victoriano Huerta: A Reappraisal (Centro de Estudios Mexicanos, 1960) attempted a rehabilitation of the counter-revolutionary viliam of orthodox historiography: Michael C. Meyer, one of the most prolific North American historians working in this field, adopted a similar, more thorough approach in Victoriano Huerta: A Political Portrait (University of Nebraska Press, 1972). Laudable though revisionism may be, it cannot be said that these attempts succeed. Meyer’s other biographical contribution, Mexican Rebel: Pascual Orozco and the Mexican Revolution (University of Nebraska Press, 1967), though slimmer, is more convincing. A somewhat narrow, self-conscious revisionism — involving the qualified reversal of traditional, individual reputations — is also evident in Peter V.N. Henderson, Félix Díaz, The Porfirians and the Mexican Revolution (University of Nebraska Press, 1981) (more profound work on counter-revolutionary movements has recently been done in Mexico, notably by Javier García-Diego Dantant; it remains unpublished in English). A major revisionist figure receives ample treatment in the study of mestizos in the Revolution by Tomás Regalado (Springer-Verlag, 1978), accompanied by Mario Vargas Llosa’s essay on the same subject for the Oxford History of the Spanish People (Oxford University Press, 1980). A notable exception is the work of the Mexican sociologist and historian of Waier, who recently translated as We Come to Object (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), draws on oral evidence and neatly complements Womack, especially in its deft analysis of post-revolutionary trends.

Unlike many of the biographers mentioned here, Womack — whose current work is in the fields of economic and labour history — is alive to the varied, fresh approaches which have recently flourished in Mexican historiography. Conventional politi- cal narrative has now been overtaken by regional, thematic, and a more thoroughly revisionist history (in these respects, Mexican revolutionary studies tend to follow French precedent, though with an appreciable lag). Many of the best regional and revisionist historians are represented in the valuable collection edited by D.A. Brading, Cauldron and Peasant in the Mexican Revolution (Cambridge University Press, 1980), which includes Hector Aguilar’s seminal analysis of the Sonoran revolutionaries, who emerged to govern Mexico in the 1920s, as well as excellent studies by Ian Jacobs (on Guerro), Dudley Anker (San Luis Potosí), Heather Fowler Salamini (Veracruz), Raymond Buve (Tlaxcala).
Many of these regional studies, focusing on the countryside, necessarily concentrate on the role of the peasantry. Synthetic analyses of that role, however, are rare, or disappointing. The agrarian background to the Revolution is neatly and originally summarised by Friedrich Katz in a volume of the Hispanic American Historical Review (LIV, 1974), which also contains relevant articles by John Coatsworth (the rural impact of the railways) and Evelyn Hu-Dehart (the Yaqui Indian rebellions). Paul J. Vanderwood’s Disorder and Progress: Bandits, Police and Mexican Development (University of Nebraska Press, 1981) opens up a stimulating perspective on the pre-revolutionary countryside, though the police get better (i.e., more convincing) treatment than the bandits. Generally, the best ‘peasant’ studies are local studies, some anthropological as much as historical: Paul Friedrich’s excellent Agrarian Revolt in a Mexican Village (Prentice Hall, 1970); Barbara Luise Margolies’ interesting and somewhat neglected Princes of the Earth (American Anthropological Association, 1975); Frans Schroyer’s model study, The Rancheros of Fisajoles (University of Toronto Press, 1980); and Luis González y González’ influential ‘microhistoria’, San José de Gracia: Mexican Village in Transition (University of Texas Press, 1974), a study over the longue durée which has now been much imitated, but rarely equalled. Local historians, of course, are not always best placed to judge the typicality or untypicality of their particular case, region, or peasantry. They have recently tended to de-emphasise the revolutionary role of the peasants, stressing instead the manipulative power of elites and thus rejecting the old popular agrarian vision of the Revolution; in my view (see my contribution to Braden, Caudillo and Peasant) they have carried this revisionism too far. Similar methodological problems arise from some of the more individualist anthropological and oral studies (e.g., Oscar Lewis’ readable Pedro Martínez: A Mexican Peasant and his Family, Panther Books, 1969, or Oscar J. Martínez, Fragments of the Mexican Revolution, University of New Mexico Press, 1983), which tend to dissolve the Revolution into an anomic chaos of confused, ultimately disillusioned individuals. As Warman has shown, oral accounts can be profitably – if carefully – used; alone, they can mislead as much as they enlighten.

The urban working class has received better, comprehensive treatment (it was, of course, smaller and more homogenous than the peasantry). Rodney D. Anderson, Outcasts in their own Land (Northern Illinois University Press, 1976), offers an impressive analysis of labour in the crucial pre-revolutionary decade, combining original research, comparative insight, and a healthy scepticism as regards received (radical) opinion; in which he differs from John M. Hart, Anarchism and the Mexican Working Class (University of Texas Press, 1978). On the Revolution itself, Ramon Eduardo Ruiz, Labor and the Ambivalent Revolutionaries: Mexico 1911-23 (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976) is well-researched and succinct; my own The Working Class and the Mexican Revolution, c. 1900-1920, Journal of Latin American Studies, XVI, 1984, offers an overview; the specific role of the miners is debated between myself and F.-X. Guerra in the pages of Annals, E.S.C., 36, 38, 1981, 1983.

Working-class politics were steeped in anti-clericalism. Church-State conflict, which culminated in the Cristiada, the great Catholic rebellion of the later 1920s, has been extensively studied by the pre-eminent French historian of modern Mexico, Jean Meyer, whose monumental three volume La Cristiada (Sagio Veintiuno Editores, 1974) has been translated and squeezed, perhaps a little hastily and sloppily, into a single slim volume: The Criollo Rebellion (Cambridge University Press, 1976). Meyer, focusing on the 1920s, has a lot to tell us about the outcome of the Revolution; and something (though
monographs and methods multiply, so our vision of the Revolution has become more complex, more sophisticated, but also more fragmentary. Local studies, in particular, reveal a congerie of ‘revolutions’; we are unsure which are typical; and revisionism which challenges continuity and elite manipulation (as against rupture and popular mobilisation) call into question the very fact of ‘Revolution’. Like its French counterpart, the Mexican Revolution risks almost being researched out of existence (qua ‘Revolution’).

Recent syntheses have done little to resist these trends. On the left, ever a source of sketchy resumés, Donald Hodges and Ross Gandy, Mexico, 1910-82: Reform or Revolution? (Zed Press, 1982) is chiefly useful for its resumé of other resumés. Adolfo Gilly, The Mexican Revolution (Verso Editions, 1983), is more substantial but—necessarily for a book written by a political prisoner in the uncongenial circumstances of Lecumberri gaol, Mexico City—is stronger on theoretical position (which is forthrightly Trotskyist) than on empirical evidence. Nora Hamilton, The Limits of State Autonomy: Post-Revolutionary Mexico (Princeton University Press, 1982) is a powerful analysis, but chiefly devoted to the 1930s. Other synthetic approaches have been tried. James W. Wilkie, The Mexican Revolution: Federal Expenditure and Social Change since 1910 (University of California Press, 1970) is a useful statistical and budgetary compendium, very limited on the pre-1920 period (and open to some methodological objections for the later years). John Rutherford, Mexican Society during the Revolution: A Literary Approach (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1971), makes an interesting but ultimately unsuccessful attempt to recover the elusive social history of the Revolution from its novels (in passing, it is worth recommending the strong, sombre visions of the Revolution conjured by Mariano Azuela whose novels—The Underdogs, The Bosses, The Trials of a Respectable Family—have been widely translated). Finally, Ramon Eduardo Ruiz, The Great Rebellion: Mexico, 1905-24 (W.W. Norton, 1980) ditches the narrative form, preferring to present a collage of revolutionary images; individually arresting, and well-researched, they do not add up to a coherent picture. Whether my own forthcoming attempt at synthesis (The Mexican Revolution, 2 vols., Cambridge University Press, 1985-6) will do so, I leave for others to judge.


After 1918 British radicals liked to believe that the First World War was the result of a conspiracy between armaments manufacturers, super-patriotic newspaper editors and aristocratic diplomats. A.J.A. Morris, who is already an authority on pre-war radicalism, has now dissected the evidence behind this myth and found it wanting on several counts. There were super-patriotic journalists like J.L. Garvin of the Observer and Leo Masee of the National Review who never tired of reminding their readers that Germany’s ambitions to be a world power were incompatible with the security of the British empire or that the Liberals were unfit to govern because they preferred pensions to Dreadnoughts. In 1907 the Daily Mail reminded Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman that the public had not elected him to weaken its Navy for the sole purpose of providing funds for doles to the Socialists’. Readers of popular daily papers wanted to be entertained and diverted, not educated. The popular press did not provide them with detailed information and analysis about very complicated defence matters. Instead it presented its readers with a set of general assumptions which, by the force of constant repetition, became elevated to the status of holy writ.

The Liberal government was the victim of an orchestrated campaign of vilification directed against its defence policy. But in fact the patriotic press was powerless to alter government policy. Its real importance was demonstrated by its inability to persuade either the Liberals or even many Unionist leaders like A.J. Balfour to accept conscription. Nor was the truth in influence all one way. The press was itself subject to a good deal of deliberate manipulation. Foreign Office officials paid lip-service to the importance of public opinion but ignored it when it did not suit their purpose. At the Admiralty Sir John Fisher, who had tried the truth of the adage that all barrels leak from the top by spreading government secrets far and wide amongst the press in order to win support for his reforms, Morris finds little evidence to suggest that any of the pre-war scares pushed the cabinet in a direction in which