

Review

Dictablanda: Politics, Work and Culture in Mexico, 1938–1968

Paul Gillingham and Benjamin T. Smith (eds). Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014. 464pp.

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Dictablanda is a volume of essays examining three main forms of power in post-revolutionary Mexico: political, cultural, and material power. That is, the scope of powers that rose-up and matured between 1938 and 1968. The study is located at mid-twentieth century when the revolutionary effervescence fizzled out and conservative-reactionary politics matured. These thirty years are considered the heyday of the authoritarian rule of the one party regime led by the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI). In the following review, I only cover some of the chapters of the compilation. An all-inclusive assessment would have been too extensive and would have left little for the reader to enjoy and value.

The title is a Spanish language play of words, for soft dictatorship. The editors understanding of the term is different. They consider ‘dictablanda’ as a “hybrid regime that combines democratic and authoritarian elements” (vii). They disagree with terminology alluding to twenty-century Mexico as a well-defined authoritarian or totalitarian state. Gillingham and Smith, co-authors of the introduction, indicate the novel approaches utilized by the essayists to examine the period in question. Among these are

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broader access to documentation not previously considered or available, abundance of data, and the opening of declassified police and intelligence records. Second and no less significant is the abandonment of a historiographical practice that tended to reduce the diversity and complexity of the country into one persuasive narrative. For decades, the history of the regimes after the 1929 institutionalization of the Revolution with the creation of the PRI and the Six Year Plan of the PRI in 1934 were a succession of orderly six years terms. Each term presumed superior and more prosperous than the previous one. The Mexican Miracle with its political stability, fast industrialization and urbanization processes was less peaceful and more intricate than the official history version. The analysis of those thirty years are evidence of open and selective repression of discontents. In the same way, rural and urban areas saw the reemergence of vestiges of the past morphed into modern and stronger types of governmental and private social controls. The system honed effective mechanisms of silencing the resistance and placating vocal intellectuals and middle classes. In effect, *cacicazgos* (political bosses), union corruption and racketeering (*charrismo and gansterismo sindical*), *guardias blancas*, (rural private paramilitaries), *pistolerismo* (hired gunmen), rigged elections and cooptation of disenfranchised union, leftists, and student leaders were standard ways of dealing with the opposition. The suppression of agitation by ruthless violence was concealed, regularly unseen, and systematically denied. Disappearance was and still is one of the most sinister forms of coercion. These practices are acknowledged as the turf of untraceable government agencies under the command of the military, police, and intelligence agencies. More recently, disappearing has accumulated thousands of people all over the country.

The essays, written by a select group of Mexicanists, are grouped under general themes: “high and low politics; work and resource regulation; and culture and ideology (vii). There is still one more exercise of power under review: violence. The focus on violence points to deep contradictions in the representation of the Mexican political system. The peaceful façade and proclaimed stability were rhetorical exercises of the power cliques. It was the average propaganda material for international and national investors. The orderly political transitions were a complex combination of alliances, repression, and powerful control of the media.

Dictablanda chapters opens with an essay by Alan Knight who has concentrated considerable part of his scholarship to the study of the Mexican Revolution. According to

this author, the transition from Lazaro Cardenas (1934–40) to Manuel Avila Camacho (1940–46) was one of de-radicalization of popular reform amidst economic decline, upsurge of conservatism, and World War II. Roberto Blancarte takes a thoughtful look at the historically tarnished relations between State and Church. The 1940s were a time of transformation for the contenders. Manuel Avila Camacho famous words, “I am a believer” (*Soy creyente*) literally proclaimed a truce. It is until the late 1960s that significant changes were introduced at the heart of the Catholic Church. The Council of Bishops’ Conferences of Latin America and the Caribbean (CELAM) promoted ecclesiastical communities and Liberation theology. The sponsors soon suffered a backlash at the hands of traditionalists led by Pope John Paul II.

A most thought-provoking chapter deals with the impervious history of the Mexican military by Thomas Rath. The military rarely, if at any time, allowed their “history” to be known or ever opened doors to examination by outsiders. Less likely they are to be held accountable in the culture of secrecy that dominates the institution. On the opposite side of discretion are the colorful stories of mid-twentieth century *caciques*. They were the embodiment of the stereotypical strongman tradition of post-revolutionary Mexico with deep roots in history. Hernandez Rodriguez and Pansters revise this legacy. Focused on the study of resilient and tough regional bosses as Gonzalo N. Santos, Maximino Avila Camacho, and Jorge Rojo Gomez, to mention a few, they demonstrate how regional politics managed to extend its sway into the upper echelons of government. Rigged elections and a façade of fair democratic process was norm.

Union corruption with its persistent alliance with the PRI government and internal cronyism created a culture of hopelessness and cynicism among rank and file workers. Charrismo (crooked union leaders) bureaucratized unions and kept them under tight control for the duration of World War II. However, the mechanism was not as vertical or constricted. In reality, there was room for negotiation and consent through paybacks. There were nonetheless attempts at breaking the controlling grip. Most often times the defiance ended in repression, i.e., miners, railroads workers, teachers, and doctors. Still the spirit of resistance gained momentum in the 1960s and strengthened in the 1970s. Braceros who moved North as part of the U.S.-Mexico Agreement of 1942 financed rural communities and freed government social programs monies that were diverted to the bottomless pockets of covetous politicians. The analysis of these

processes are undertaken in the chapters under the section dedicated to labor and resources. An outstanding analysis is the work of Maria Teresa Fernandez Aceves who scrutinizes the life and work of renowned Jalisco leader Maria Guadalupe Urzua Flores. She has been hailed by a few as a *cacica* (local strongwoman) and by others as an advocate of rural interests. She embodied the complex negotiations that built social policies from below and above. This section ends with a look at how taxation has been neglected as an important aspect of analysis in post-revolutionary Mexico. In “Building State on the Cheap,” Benjamin T. Smith explains how Mexicans not only refuse to pay taxes but the lack of clarity and enforcement has “encouraged a culture of illegal evasion” (258). Efforts to reform tax codes through most from the 40s to the 70s ended in failures. This financial debacle is what has maintained Mexico as one of the lowest tax paying countries in Latin America.

The “Culture and Ideology” section deals with the cultural landscape forged from the end of Cardenismo in 1938 to the uprising of university protests and the 1968 Tlatelolco student massacre. Media representations, movie productions, and the emergence of the domineering power of the Televisa conglomerate are thoroughly analyzed by Andrew Paxman’s “Cooling to Cinema and Warming to Television: State Mass Media Policy, 1940–1964.” Pablo Picatto’s chapter on murder, politics, and violence in twentieth century Mexico explores the infamous journalistic “nota roja” (tabloid journalism that reports on the seamy crime section in Mexican newspapers). The relationship between pistoleros (gunmen), PRI, and the underground economy of gambling, drugs, and prostitution are intertwined to a point where they become undistinguishable. Spectacular homicides, kidnappings, and violence are presented in crass details as popular reading in tabloids.

Tanalís Padilla essay focuses on the history of *normales rurales*. These were the teachers colleges created after 1921 inception of the Secretaría de Educación Pública (SEP) under José Vasconcelos. Under the Cárdenas regime these schools were transformed and given a semi-autonomous rule to train school teachers and agricultural technicians. The student body was the peasantry in the State where the normal was located. The schools were constantly under pressure to reform as they were considered hubs for leftists’ radicals. One famous graduate from the Normal of Ayotzinapa (Guerrero) was Lucio Cabañas. He led the Party of the Poor and its armed wing, Peasants Justice Brigade (1964–76). He waged war against the government until he was killed by the military. After the 1960s,

the government diminished the number of schools and literally starved them by contracting the budget.

Jaime Pensado deals with what has been called Mexico's student problem after 1956. That is, the role of the students at the two main public institutions of higher learning in the country. The UNAM (Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México) that obtained its autonomy in 1929 and the Politécnico (Instituto Politécnico Nacional) created by Cardenas in 1936. These two institutions have been crucial centers of resistance to the government's corruption and distancing from social justice. Pensado argues that it was the 1956 student movement the defining moment in student activism in the context of Cold War politics. He considers this the beginning of a new era in political participation of students and the heavy handed reaction of the authoritarian regime.

All the chapters in the volume demonstrate the intricacies of Mexican politics. Moreover, it evidences that not all in post-revolutionary Mexico was consent, manipulation, confrontation, negotiation or violence. The PRI was at times popular and at others, loathed. If anything, this work offers evidence for how paradoxical was mid-century Mexico. This book is a must read for scholars and graduate students. Novel approaches, fields of inquiry, and documentation allow an enhanced understanding of modern Mexico.