

ÉTUDE CRITIQUE / REVIEW ESSAY

A Selection from Mexican Studies

Herman L. Bennett — *Africans in Colonial Mexico: Absolutism, Christianity, and Afro-Creole Consciousness, 1570–1640*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2003. Pp. x, 275.

Jeffrey L. Bortz and Stephen Haber, eds. — *The Mexican Economy, 1870–1930: Essays on the Economic History of Institutions, Revolution, and Growth*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002. Pp. xvii, 348.

Christopher R. Boyer — *Becoming Campesinos: Politics, Identity, and Agrarian Struggle in Postrevolutionary Michoacán, 1920–1935*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003. Pp. xii, 320.

These three books represent a small portion of the vast contemporary literature on Mexican studies, but nothing else links them except that each is an excellent example of the field. Separated in chronology by 350 years, they suggest the richness of the historiography of Mexico and the complexity of its society.

Herman L. Bennett's *Africans in Colonial Mexico: Absolutism, Christianity, and Afro-Creole Consciousness, 1570–1640* is not simply a study of African slaves and free blacks in early colonial New Spain; it is also a commentary on the "social history of absolutism". Beyond controlling behaviour, the Spanish Hapsburg monarchy sought to control the consciousness of its subjects, which, as Bennett says, is power indeed. In colonial Mexico the institution of slavery was largely urban rather than rural, and, because the population comprised other significant elements (notably, indigenous people), Bennett insists that early colonial Mexico City had a society of slaves but was not a slave society. By the mid-sixteenth century people of African descent actually outnumbered Spaniards (but not indigenous people) in New Spain. By 1640, when the Portuguese slave trade to Spanish America ended, there were 35,089 Africans and 116,529 persons of African descent in colonial Mexico.

The problem with tracing the history of the blacks in colonial Mexico is

that they immediately began to creolize, that is, to undergo the transition from first-generation African slaves to second-generation locally born, free Afro-Spanish Americans; as a result, they did not remain a separate or easily identifiable sector of the total population (unlike the far more numerous Indians, who were specifically protected and set apart by royal decree). It is possible, however, to recapture some of this lost history by using documents emanating from the attempts to regulate the blacks in colonial society, and no official agency of Hispanism kept better records than the Inquisition. Since the Church deemed conjugality the principal means through which the laity, including baptized slaves, could lead orthodox lives within the bounds that, according to the state, constituted good behaviour, the Church at all times and in all issues protected legal marriage. Thus the greater part of the book traces individual cases of marriage disputes and of bigamy among blacks, both free and slave, as heard by the Inquisition. In cases involving the separation of married slaves, the Church always found in favour of conjugal status, thereby overriding the rights of the owner. Ameliorating slavery was not the intent, but royal and Christian absolutism meant that the owner's rights were not total, and the slave's bondage was effectively limited to a generation at most.

Through the myriad of case studies Bennett emphasizes how complex the slave's social relations were and also how active slaves and free blacks were in the pursuit of legal redress. Thus, while Bennett specifically declines to address the so-called "Tannenbaum thesis" (that slavery in Spanish and Portuguese America was gentler than in Anglo-America because of the intercession of the Catholic Church and the Spanish or Portuguese crowns), his data focus fundamentally on that very issue. In effect, this book is a study of one aspect of the process by which identity based on race was transformed into identity based on culture. The book is a fascinating update of these rather old historiographical issues, clearly enhanced by the use of postmodern or post-colonial approaches but without the jargon that sometimes accompanies those techniques. As an attempt at social reconstruction, the book is not totally satisfying, mainly because the Inquisition cases tended to be repetitive and to cluster around similar issues. Nonetheless, Bennett has opened many new windows; his work merits an honoured place in the literature on the black presence in colonial Mexican history, which has seen several significant new books in recent years.

In chronological order, the next book is *The Mexican Economy, 1870–1930: Essays on the Economic History of Institutions, Revolution, and Growth*, edited by Jeffrey L. Bortz and Stephen Haber. It includes ten articles, written by eight authors including the two editors: Bortz, Haber, Noel Maurer, Carlos Marichal, Paolo Riguzzi, Sandra Kuntz Ficker, Edward Beatty, and Aurora Gómez-Galvarriato. Despite the reference to revolution in the subtitle, almost all of the articles relate to the Porfiriato, the regime of Mexico's longest serving president, Porfirio Díaz, 1876–1911, which preceded the Revolution. The Porfiriato saw the imposition, at long last, of

domestic order and stability, which in turn allowed the regime to institute planned economic development based on the massive transfer of Indian community land to private landowners, the opening of doors for foreign investment and ownership, and the rapid expansion of industries such as textiles, railroads, and petroleum. Economic development was partly a product of the establishment of new business and banking, and the term “institutions” in the title refers to the formulation of regulatory structures to hasten economic processes. The articles, therefore, largely relate to banking, foreign debt, mortgage contracts, foreign trade, and labour management in a pro-market political context, while one chapter relates to the limits on private property rights in industry during the 1910–1917 Revolution.

This is all much more interesting than it might sound; indeed, many of the articles are fascinating and deeply linked, at least implicitly, to fundamental social processes in the late nineteenth century. Central to the financial recovery of Mexico under Porfirio Díaz was the establishment of a private national bank, Banamex, which served as the government’s banker. After 60 years of default (believed to be the longest foreign debt default in modern world history), Mexico not only made the first serious efforts to pay or renegotiate its foreign debt, but even re-entered international capital markets as a substantial player. Articles also detail the revision of Mexico’s mortgage law, trade tariffs, and commercial policy, all based around a consciously aggressive developmentalism dependent on the subjugation of labour.

What makes this book particularly useful to historians is that each of the authors is a historical economist. That is, they study economics through the lens of real history rather than purely as theory or mathematics or as some magical force swirling through free markets. As the editors put it: “The historical record is the only natural laboratory that economists have to study the causes and consequences of institutional change” (p. xv). Thus the “New Institutional Economics”, as they call it, is the study of the rules of society’s workings using historically informed economics. This approach is a great relief to historians because it limits speculation to the historically demonstrable. Though somewhat technical in places, the articles are readable and usable. The social revolution after 1910 can be measured in the changes that occurred in economic institutions. In a decade, Mexico moved from having no labour laws to having the most extensive labour legislation in the Western Hemisphere based on limiting the power of private property and extending the power of labour as represented by unions. In other words, it becomes clear, when addressed at the level of economics, how the Mexican Revolution redefined property rights. Despite its apparently daunting subject, this book will make sense to social historians and warrants their attention.

Perhaps the most noteworthy of the three books is Christopher R. Boyer’s *Becoming Campesinos: Politics, Identity, and Agrarian Struggle in Postrevolutionary Michoacán, 1920–1935*. Very much a work of social history, the book argues that the whole concept of the rural peasant labourers as *campesinos*, as a class rather than simply a job or residential descriptive, was

developed in the radical agrarian reform movement of the Mexican Revolution, and most specifically in the agricultural state of Michoacán during the governorship from 1928 to 1932 of General Lázaro Cárdenas, who later became the greatest president of the Mexican Revolution from 1934 to 1940.

Boyer's thesis is that the advocates of radical agrarian reform, the *agraristas*, created the *campesino* identity as a mechanism for incorporating the agrarian worker and country folk in general into the Revolution and as a technique for overcoming the resistance of important leaders of the Revolution to agrarian redistribution. Boyer contrasts the short and unsuccessful governorship from 1920 to 1922 in Michoacán of the earliest agrarian radical leader, General Francisco Múgica, with the astonishingly productive administration of Cárdenas. While Cárdenas, Múgica, and many others automatically assumed that *campesinos* existed as an unchanging eternal reality, the *campesino* identity is actually an outgrowth of popular militancy in local revolutionary ideologies. After the fall of Múgica as governor, the group Boyer calls "village revolutionaries" — local agrarian leaders, union organizers, and schoolteachers — kept the demand for agrarian redistribution alive in time for Cárdenas to become governor in 1928. Class, political consciousness, and massive revolutionary government support, therefore, led to cultural identity. This is a wonderful leading-edge approach to one of the fundamental issues of modern Mexican history, and it is profoundly revisionist. The irony, of course, is that in only a few decades the *campesino* identity would be overwhelmed by Mexico's transition to an urban industrialized country.

Adding a further layer of interpretation, Boyer reminds us that the agrarian revolution in Mexico took place in a world of Bolshevism, Fascism, and depression, and therefore was really a moderate alternative that responded to populist demands. As with every truism in Mexican history, this solution is deeply contradictory and also a source of strength for both the nation-state and civil society. Most of all, the nation-state was modernizing and secularizing; it saw the Church as providing an alternative model of Mexican nationhood that had to be overcome.

One advantage of Boyer's thesis is that it provides a solution explaining how the very same agrarian peasants who were among the primary beneficiaries of the Revolution (or at least were promised they would be) could rise up in substantial numbers in 1926 to 1928 in the Cristero Rebellion, an uprising aiming to restore Catholic nationalism over a secularized country. Boyer explains that when the rural labouring population redefined themselves as *campesinos* they could then recognize themselves as both *campesinos* and Catholic, and also as indigenous. As many as 50,000 residents of Michoacán, one in fifteen in the population, participated in the Cristero Rebellion. As governor from 1928 to 1932, Cárdenas established official *agrarismo* because it was in reality a regimented empowerment of the masses. Cárdenas was the ultimate legitimizer of the *campesino* as an identity and the most beloved of the Revolution's leaders; yet he also limited the extent of popular

radicalism and channelled it in a manner that could provide political stability in the long term. Boyer's work continues the tendency of recent scholarship on Mexico to portray Lázaro Cárdenas as perhaps one of the modern world's great geniuses in the political incorporation, mobilization, and management of the masses, while affirming the sincerity of his revolutionary sentiments. Boyer does not claim his argument applies to any state other than Michoacán, so it remains to be seen how regional specialists and historians of the Mexican agrarian reform respond to this innovative thesis.

All three of these books tend to reinforce the notion of Mexican exceptionalism. Possibly none of the authors intended it, but the net effect is to imply ways in which Mexico really is different from the rest of Latin America. This continues to provoke genuine debate among scholars, but for the general reader the key is to remember that none of the 21 nations of Latin America is identical to another, something that Anglo-North Americans need to recognize.

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