The Roots of Conservatism in Mexico: Catholicism, Society, and Politics in the Mixteca Baja, 1750–1962

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Over the last three decades, histories of popular politics in Latin America have proliferated. It is not hard to understand why. Elections and liberalism loomed large in the present, and so their history began to assume more importance. Larger trends in the discipline reinforced the shift, as historians tipped the interpretive scales away from socio-economic structures and towards agency. Two periods in particular have enjoyed attention. The first 50 years after independence used to be dominated by images of personalist caudillos, foreign-inspired and meaningless constitutions, and the melancholy elitism of Latin America's first intellectuals. Now we have countless studies of how ex-slaves, plebs and a supposedly parochial peasantry engaged with national politics and developed their own notions of popular sovereignty, federalism and liberalism. In the words of a key figure, such histories pose 'a haunting challenge to take seriously the ideals of Post-Enlightenment liberal nation-states'.(1) Another important body of scholarship has examined the aftermath of the Mexican Revolution of 1910–20, again emphasizing 'everyday forms of state formation' and the nitty-gritty of grassroots politics – work that is now extending into the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s, normally seen as the heyday of the post-revolutionary regime's stability and control.(2)

Extending over two centuries, Benjamin Smith's book provides a rare link between these historiographies, draws inspiration from them, and challenges them. Above all, it is a plea for historians to take grassroots conservatism seriously – to describe its complexities and explain its endurance with the care afforded to liberalism and revolutionary nationalism. To do this, Smith creatively blends the new political history with a strong dose of Thompsonian social history, recent (mainly European) studies of popular piety, and, last but not least, the Mexican tradition of centuries-spanning microhistoria inaugurated by Luis González y González. The result is an impressively deep, wide-ranging regional study, which illuminates many important debates and themes.

The Mixteca Baja lies primarily in the north west of the state of Oaxaca, encroaching a little onto the states of Puebla and Guerrero. It is isolated and rugged, with parched mountainsides perforated by a few narrow, fertile valleys. Smith argues that, until the 1960s, politics here was dominated by what he calls provincial conservatism, defined by two enduring traits: a Burkean preference for 'gradual change,' and a defense of the Catholic Church as the 'moderator' of that change – a defense that often implied fierce hostility to the
national state (p. 15). Six chronological chapters provide ample evidence of these traits. A first chapter describes slow and uneven colonization by Spain. The region had a long history of sedentary Mixtec civilization but lacked alluring metals or tropical cash crops. The crown allowed the Dominican order to take the lead, and colonial rule remained decidedly indirect, despite later Bourbon efforts at centralization. In chapters two and three, Smith makes sense of the notoriously chaotic period from independence to the 1860s. After a brief flirtation with federalism, elites and peasants gravitated first towards centralism and then, by the 1840s, towards a self-conscious conservatism focused above all on upholding the Catholic Church, order, and morality. Chapter four covers the Porfiriato, and shows how the nominally liberal national government allowed the church to increase its already considerable strength.

Come chapter five and the Mexican Revolution, we find the region once more scandalized by agrarian radicalism and anticlericalism. Local elites did not dare impose anticlericalism, and the region remained a bystander during the Cristero Wars of 1926–9. Conflicts with the new regime only flared with the introduction socialist education in the 1930s. Finally, chapter six examines the 1940s to the 1960s. Despite the government’s drift rightward and a national-level pact between church and state, locals resisted federal schooling, supported the Partido Acción Nacional (PAN), and engaged in rough-and-tumble resistance to electoral fraud. Indeed, earlier church efforts to embed lay organizations rather backfired, as local activism outran the newly conciliatory church hierarchy. Finally, as the Cold War warmed up, some Catholics drifted towards overblown anticomunist conspiracies and plotted the Last Cristiada, a quixotic 1962 assault against a local barracks that was quickly crushed by federal forces.

Smith's explanation of all this is woven through each chapter, and consists of two main threads. First, agrarian structure is key. Time and again the poor quality of most land insulated the region from commercial expansion and social conflict. Smith argues that a colonial-era moral economy proved adaptable and enduring: local elites – creole merchants and caciques – exploited peasant communities but ceded peasants land and autonomy. Thus, post-revolutionary land reform enjoyed little support and simply generated perverse factional divisions. Second, the church enjoyed unusual institutional strength and legitimacy. The Mixteca Baja produced most of its many clergy – often the sons of merchant and cacique families – and punched far above its demographic weight in churches, religious schools, and lay associations. The church's legitimacy rested on its sanctioning the prevailing social order, and its flexible approach to indigenous religiosity. Wisely, the church usually 'fast-tracked' local cults and devotions (p. 99). Priests believed that the Mixtecs had once been evangelized by Saint Thomas the Apostle anyway, and represented but a wayward branch of early Christianity. Of course, agrarian and institutional factors were closely intertwined: peasant communities wanted lands to feed themselves and to fund cofradías that supported religious festivities.

While Smith emphasizes socio-economic structures to a refreshingly retro degree, he avoids reductionism. The book offsets structural factors with a strong sense of contingent military and political events. In the 1830s and 1840s, locals found themselves the victim of predatory attacks by radical federalist guerrillas from surrounding areas, which decisively pushed them into the opposing camp. Warfare encouraged more concessions from local elites to peasant communities. In the 1830s, Smith shows how hard-up caciques began to sell their lands to peasants; by 1900, this process had hugely expanded peasant landholding. After the 1860s, peasants tended to buy up land as 'agricultural societies'. Though legally private property, these societies allowed for the de facto continuation of traditional communal rule and cofradías. During the Mexican Revolution, peasant communities had the misfortune of running into some of the most cynical and opportunist Zapatistas going: Juan Andreu Almazán and Higinio Aguilar.

Remarkable empirical research bolsters these arguments. Smith draws on 40 national and regional archives, but makes particularly original use of diocesan and parochial records, benefitting from recent cataloguing by private foundations. He also seems to have read just about every work published on the region since the 18th century. Of course, the recovery of peasant perspectives is a challenge. This is particularly the case before the slow growth in literacy and external state agencies in the 20th century. To tackle the problem, Smith reads between the lines of elite correspondence, recovers sporadic petitions, and, above all, allows actions to speak as loud as words. It is hard to know exactly what 19th-century peasants made of the church, but they
continued to pay tithes and rates of illegitimacy declined. All this allows for a plethora of telling detail; confrontations with the post-revolutionary state are particularly memorable. Official reenactments of independence-era battles degenerated into mass brawls between Catholics and agraristas. Villagers in Dinicuitia donned carnival masks, shouted 'long live religion, death to the government', surrounded the federal school, and then made 'various distasteful speculations about the teacher's mother' (p. 240). In a judgment strangely reminiscent of Spinal Tap's critical reception, one priest simply muttered 'a load of teachers, a load of shit' (p. 256).

There are regular pauses where the region is placed in a broader context. Although unusual in liberal Oaxaca, Smith develops a suggestive model of 're-Christianization' to describe similar regions of agrarian calm and church strength in Mexico; future historians will be encouraged to flesh out the model with further research. He also compares provincial and metropolitan conservatism. Provincials could agree with Mexico City elites about many things but never wholly embraced their political elitism or drive for centralization. (Here, perhaps, is one reason why notionally liberal coalitions ultimately proved more viable.) Smith's main intended audiences are historians of popular politics and lay-church relations, but he touches on many other themes. Political economists will benefit from his discussion of roving haciendas volantes, and the peculiar local effects of liberal property regimes. Smith also has interesting things to say about the construction of Mixtec identity in opposition to neighboring indigenous groups. Gender historians will find evidence of the ambiguous effects of liberalism on women, popular responses to moral prescription, and the effects of the Catholic Church's late 19th-century model of 'supercharged female piety' (p. 186). Although the church understood the growth of women's religious activism as the consolidation of tradition, it was a 'profound gender shift' (p. 187).

Indeed, any book on conservatism is necessarily a study of historical consciousness and this is perhaps the most compelling theme. Socio-economic change really was slow compared to other regions, but as important was how history was represented and understood. Smith argues that the Catholic Church maintained a 'veneer of cultural continuity': it selected which changes were significant, assimilated them into a history of continuous, benevolent clerical leadership and ethnic harmony, and disseminated this history through sermons, religious education, and public commemorations (p. 15). Occasionally, how this veneer was concocted and applied would have repaid more analysis. The church embraced some modern changes (democratic citizenship, private property) but quite when and why, and how they were reconciled, is not always clear. Was democracy understood as a progressive innovation, or the refashioning of an earlier consensus? How (if at all) did the church reconcile its support for private property with its historical role as guardian of communal lands? Perhaps such things never needed explicit discussion. If the church had (or acquired) a sense of (very slow) historical progress, how did this interact with the non-linear understanding of time embedded in indigenous cults tied to harvests, seasons, and the diabolical upheaval of civil war? On the face of it, caciques' loss of land seems like a very considerable change, but it is striking how little it impinged on notions of history. Of course, the questionable legality of agricultural societies probably discouraged public discussion. Still, it would be interesting to know more about how peasant communities understood the material decline of their caciques – who had presumably ruled since time immemorial until that point – even if it consisted mainly in forgetting all about them.

The only readers likely to be disappointed are those hoping for discussion of contemporary politics. The book stops rather abruptly in the mid 1960s, as the post-revolutionary state repressed Catholic extremists and directed developmental largesse towards moderates, and as some kind of church-state pact finally came to the Mixteca Baja. On the one hand, Smith shows admirable professional restraint. Buried away in a footnote are some sensible reasons why a longer epilogue would be 'rather pointless': the sources run out, laity and clergy split under the impact of liberation theology, capitalist development, and democratization; in the next 50 years the moral economy described by Smith seems to have been obliterated (p. 370, n. 269). Still, given the richness of analysis to this point, the end is slightly disappointing. Did the 200 years before 1962 leave no specific legacy worth knowing about? If the last 50 years have seen such a dramatic change, what does this suggest about our understanding and periodization of Mexican history as a whole? An epilogue might have provided another perspective on historical memory. Smith knows and uses the work of numerous local
historians. One wonders how his account tallies with theirs, and what (if any) political implications this history still has. Popular liberalism has grabbed most historians' attention partly because it seems to offer clues about how contemporary liberal democracy – as elsewhere, the only political game in town – might work in more socially and ethnically inclusive ways. Some clearer connections to the present may be necessary if popular conservatism is to enjoy the same prominence.

In sum, this book is necessary reading for historians of modern Mexico, and makes a lasting contribution to Latin America's agrarian, political, and religious history. Along with work on popular royalism, it forms part of a new wave of studies broadening the scope of political history. Anyone interested in understanding conservatism as a powerful, dynamic, and invented tradition will profit from Smith's account of the material reality and cultural construction of gradual historical change. It would be a shame if the chronological sweep of the book discouraged teachers from using it for undergraduate courses. Smith's prose is clear and assertive throughout, and individual chapters work as compelling introductions to a host of debates about 19th-century and revolutionary history.

Notes


The author is happy to accept this review and does not wish to comment further.

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