much wider audience, for it clearly underscores the character, scope, and consequences of U.S. policy in Central America. The article by Deere alone makes it a worthwhile work.


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The post-1940 Mexican economic “miracle” terminated in a severe crisis, now characterized by heavy capital flight, 100% annual inflation, and plummeting oil prices. One important aspect was the agricultural crisis which started in the late 1960s and compelled a traditionally food-exporting country to divert diminishing foreign exchange to food imports. As a result the Mexican state is having to impose severe austerity policies after a long period of prosperity which underpinned corporatist control of mass organizations linked to the dominant party.

The two books under review deal with complementary issues related to contemporary Mexico. One deals with the rural population, while the other deals with welfare politics in Mexico City. Beyond the complementarity of topics there is not much in common between the two books. I will deal with each in turn.

Ann L. de Rouffignac’s central idea is that the Mexican peasantry is today both (1) a class-in-itself and (2) a class-for-itself, the first because it is directly confronted with capital in an exploitative relationship, the second because peasant struggles “disrupt capital accumulation” in seeking the recovery of peasant land and lifestyle.

Moreover, to the extent that the peasantry confronts capital in both circulation and production, the author argues that the peasantry should be considered a sector of the working class or the proletariat. It does not matter, in her view, which stratum of the working-class “hierarchy” (created by capital as a divisive measure) peasants belong to. They may appear as day laborers working for a wage, as contract farmers selling produce to state or private firms, as landless and unemployed members of the reserve army of workers, as unwaged housewives working to reproduce labor power for the benefit of “capital.” But as long as all those workers, waged or unwaged, are exploited by capital they form part of the same class which the author chooses to call the working class or the proletariat. Thus de Rouffignac’s class structure is made up of two antagonistic poles: capital and working class. The latter has two main “sectors,” the waged and the unwaged parts, but both share a ubiquitous common enemy: capital.

The author proposes a framework for analysis that she calls the “social capital” perspective, inspired by Italian Marxists such as Marisara Della Costa, Toni Negri, and Mario Tronti. Based upon the argument of volume two of _Capital_, this perspective proposes that the accumulation of total social capital implies the accumulation of classes as well. Then there is a “social factory” in which much of the reproduction of labor power is carried on by unwaged work. Thus, “Tronti’s concept of the social factory provided the basis for understanding and including other groups’ struggles (such as students, women, the unemployed, and . . . the peasants) within the overall Marxist analysis of working-class struggle against capital” (p. 25).

In the Mexican context this argument proves paradoxical. The author presents the two main positions, the _descampesinista_ (Leninist) and _campesinista_ (Chayanovist). The Leninist position is very heavily criticized for lacking confidence in peasant struggles, and conversely having too much faith in the proletariat. In contrast, the campesinista position is praised for proposing a “peasant route” as an alternative to capitalist development. However, the whole argument tries to demonstrate that peasants are part of the working class, and that they thus have a “right” (as if it were a legal or a moral issue and not a class structural one) to be considered as revolutionary as well. In trying to support her campesinista position, the author even presents examples in which agricultural wage workers, i.e., proletarians proper, ally with landowners against peasants. In effect, de Rouffignac presents a procapitalist proletariat. After seeing how “reactionary” proletarians can be, one cannot help being puzzled by this effort to demonstrate the “working class character” of the peasantry.

When the Mexican case is tackled, one does not find any intermediate theory which links the highly abstract formulations about “circuits of capital” and peasant struggles in the Mexican countryside. The many “examples” of how the peasantry “disrupts capital” always conclude with oversimplified theoretical punchlines.

In short, this book is more a political statement than a scholarly work. Indeed, rather than presenting evidence to support a theory, she gives only “illustrations” of polemical assertions,
and no testable hypotheses. These illustrations tend to confirm the author’s view of the Mexican countryside. But if the social scientific enterprise simply consisted of casual illustrations of political views, then the line between politics and science would become very blurred.

Peter Ward’s book is the first one to provide a comprehensive explanation of welfare politics in Mexico. Using a combination of primary and secondary sources, Ward focuses on the policy and performance of three Mexican administrations: President Echeverria’s (1970–76), Lopez Portillo’s (1976–82) and the present one of Miguel de la Madrid (1982–88). He aptly contextualizes his study with two chapters on the political economy of Mexico over the past two decades, and he draws interesting comparisons with other Latin American countries.

Ward’s metaphorical subtitle “papering over the cracks” is quite revealing. The “cracks” are basically the structures of economic, political, and social inequality in Mexico, where an “inclusionary authoritarian” regime tries to cope with popular mobilization and competing interest groups with its management of welfare politics.

There are three key issues tackled by Ward: (1) the differences in welfare policies between the three administrations, and how political bureaucracies behave in contrast with technical bureaucracies; (2) the role and importance of community mobilization for welfare services and in self-help programs; and (3) the present and future prospects for social welfare provision. These issues are analyzed by focusing on the study of three substantive welfare areas in irregular settlements of Mexico City: land for self-help housing, urban services (water and electricity), and health.

One of Ward’s strategies to generate a “feel” for each of the three administrations under study is to formulate ideal–typical constructs of “technical” and “political” bureaucracies. The former is one “which is autonomous, stable, accountable and objective”; while a politicized agency lacks autonomy, is unstable, overly accountable, and unobjective (p. 40). Thus, Echeverria’s was a left-of-center regime which created a host of politicized agencies for welfare services provision, most of them engaged in patron–client relations with the emerging urban social movement. Later on, Lopez Portillo faced an entrepreneurial class which sent its capital abroad, reduced industrial production, and issued belligerent press releases against the government. Therefore, he responded with centrist policies to restore “confidence” and a move to streamline the bureaucracy through a major administrative reform seeking technical efficiency.

In late 1982 de la Madrid’s Mexico faced its worst financial and economic crisis ever. Oil prices had begun to plummet and Mexico’s foreign debt was the world’s second largest. His administration has moved much more to the right and his welfare policies have become yet more technocratic. The latter have involved decentralization and depoliticization of service provision, but have not meant greater popular participation. Nevertheless, “individualistic patron-client responses of yesteryear were simply not generating a sufficient flow of resources to appease the majority” (p. 133).

Does popular mobilization make a difference in welfare policy? Yes, but not that much. Ward’s book shows that assistance in the form of land and services does not come by right: it has to be fought for. Conversely, dimensions of social welfare such as health and education seem to be provided “as of right.” However, the overall effects of social welfare provision are that, socially, it divides the poor into differentially served, competing groups, and ideologically, it helps reproduce existing social relations. Ward’s central claim in this regard is that popular mobilization is deflected away from class-based (horizontal) organization towards active (vertical) competition between many unequal groups, which results in accentuating social stratification.

Expenditure on social welfare has increased in real terms since 1970 in Mexico, but it has contracted as a priority: public expenditure tripled between 1970 and 1982, while funds for social development only doubled. Ward’s conclusion is that the “best that can be said for Mexico’s social welfare programmes since 1970 is that they have run fast to stand still” (p. 136).

As far as future prospects go, Ward would like to see the state take greater responsibility for the social reproduction of the labor force, so that reliance upon self-help and kinship networks, and the endurance of hardship may be reduced among the poor. He also wishes a cultural shift to break the existing patronage system which permeates all levels of Mexican society. Yet Ward doubts that any of these changes are likely to materialize, even in the long run.

Welfare Politics in Mexico is a welcome book, which fills an important gap in the literature. It is well grounded theoretically and very informative. This work will be of interest not only to political sociologists, but also to social scientists concerned with problems of urbanization and development in Mexico and the Third World.

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