



Review: [Untitled]

Reviewed Work(s):

Farewell to the Peasantry? Political Class Formation in Rural Mexico by Gerardo Otero
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accounts that understand gender not as proxy for women, but as an organising dimension of social life, like class and race, are needed as well. The tension between these two approaches is a critical aspect of the new scholarship on gender. Clearly, this admirable book has shown how research can (and must) account for both.

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MAURA I. TORO-MORN

Gerardo Otero, *Farewell to the Peasantry? Political Class Formation in Rural Mexico* (Boulder, CO, and Oxford: Westview Press, 1999), pp. xii + 186, £46.50 hb.

This pithy book offers a theoretical analysis illustrated by three case studies. Its subject is important: what kind of politics can we expect from rural Mexico following the neoliberal restructuring of the land reform sector? Otero's approach is to revisit the Mexican debate on the 'agrarian question' of the 1970s and 1980s. He neatly exposes the class reductionist logic of both the *campesinista* position, associated with neo-Chayanovians such as Arturo Warman – a cabinet minister in the neoliberal administrations of Carlos Salinas and Ernesto Zedillo – and the *descampesinista* or *proletarista* position, associated with theorists such as Roger Bartra, who adapted traditional Leninist ideas to the specific circumstances of postrevolutionary Mexico. Another demonstration that political behaviour cannot be deduced from an objectivist account of economic class position might seem redundant. Yet Otero does more than recite familiar postmodernist litanies. His aim is to retain class analysis within a formulation of the way *political* class formation reflects relationships between economic class processes (rather than 'positions'), regional cultures, forms of state intervention and leadership types. Much of the discussion of the book is historical. In contrasting the experiences of different regions, Otero provides insights into how apparently similar economic situations give rise to different political responses.

The regions chosen are La Laguna in Coahuila, show-piece of 'radical' agrarian reform under President Cárdenas, Atencingo in Puebla, which illustrates Cárdenas's willingness to adapt ideology to regional power structures, and the Yaqui Valley of Sonora. The latter is important for the book's overall argument because Otero regards it as a 'success story' in efforts to build autonomous postcapitalist popular-democratic organisations. What the cases have in common is that rural populations were proletarianised before the land reform and collective *ejidos* were established, although these differed in the extent to which they were expressions of grassroots political empowerment that subsequent administrations sought to expunge. Much of the analysis is based on secondary sources well known to specialists, though many are unavailable in English, and Otero offers his assessments of issues that are contentious. His own fieldwork plays a more prominent role in the chapter on Atencingo, which includes results of a questionnaire on *ejidatarios'* evaluation of the new situation created by the privatisation of the sugar mill. The principal aim is to provide the kind of synthesis that eludes attempts to generalise from a single region. The exposition is clear and insightful, making the book valuable to teachers, and the theoretical argument could guide analysis of developments in other regions with different histories.

A key issue is the future political direction of a growing mass of semi-proletarian households in an increasingly polarised rural society. Otero notes that the position of both 'peasant entrepreneurs' and all but the largest agro-export capitalists is fragile, with the influence of the latter on state policy not conducive to more equitable rural development. Reform of capitalism through alliances between postcapitalist producer organisations and popular-democratic parties that respect their autonomy is seen as the way forward, since the dead hand of the corporatist state is foregrounded in the analysis of the past. Otero suggests that the alliance of state and capital offers poor prospects for labour union struggles in most of rural Mexico, and that capitalist development does not, in any event, offer comprehensive solutions to problems of lost livelihoods. What the book does not give us is a great deal of evidence about the likely future success of the forms of rural politics that Otero favours. The author has no illusions about the nature of the official programmes targeted at smaller rural producers, but the book pays little attention to the larger political-economic or geo-political context of Mexico's transformation: even the travails of the sugar industry are discussed without reference to corn syrup. The analysis is, as the author concedes, limited in its discussion of the 'leadership types' variable. Efforts to historicise 'regional culture' are limited by reliance on large-scale survey data and structural categories. Much of the time the state appears as a 'thing', over-readily separable from 'civil society' and its organisations. The best pieces of political analysis in the book are those that unpack the networks, alliances and factions that influence historical political outcomes. Despite a substantial research effort, we are still far from achieving any clear picture of the way rural Mexico is changing. Issues such as the role of the drugs economy and tourism development seem important in many regions. The postcapitalist producer organisations highlighted in this book are, as the author recognises, no more the whole of the story than the indigenous rights movements that he regards as having received more than their due share of attention. Yet it is certainly to be hoped that the author will continue his explorations of these organisations. He has demonstrated with particular elegance that conventional distinctions between 'peasant' and 'proletarian' demands have been unhelpful for understanding Mexican experience.

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Velma García-Gorena, *Mothers and the Mexican Antinuclear Power Movement: Society, Environment and Place* (Tucson, AZ: The University of Arizona Press, 1999), pp. xii + 187, \$40.00, \$19.95 pb.

This book is an analysis of the antinuclear movement's struggles to halt the construction of the Laguna Verde plant in the Mexican state of Veracruz. The discussion includes the Veracruz antinuclear movement generally but focuses more on the women's organisation, the Madres Veracruzanas. Theoretically, the central question concentrates on the usefulness of the New Social Movements (NSM) approach in understanding the development of the movement (both generally and the Madres specifically). In looking at the women's activism from a gender perspective, however, García Gorena also discusses feminist theories of maternalist political action. The discussion of the maternalist elements are