EUROPEAN REVIEW OF LATIN AMERICAN AND CARIBBEAN STUDIES
REVISTA EUROPEA DE ESTUDIOS LATINOAMERICANOS Y DEL CARIBE

No. 115 (2023): January-June, pp. 111-120
www.erlacs.org

Review Essay | Ensayo de Reseña

Building blocks for a new paradigm?
State-making, society and violence in twentieth-century Mexico

Book Review Essay by Wil G. Pansters

- *Unrevolutionary Mexico. The Birth of a Strange Dictatorship*, by Paul Gillingham, Yale University Press, 2021.
- *Agrarian Revolt in the Sierra of Chihuahua, 1959-1965*, by Elizabeth Henson, University of Arizona Press, 2019.
- *In the Vortex of Violence. Lynching, Extralegal Justice, and the State in Post-Revolutionary Mexico*, by Gema Kloppe-Santamaría, University of California Press, 2020.
- *Unintended Lessons of Revolution. Student Teachers and Political Radicalism in Twentieth-Century Mexico*, by Tanalís Padilla, Duke University Press, 2021.
- *[Tiempo suspendido]. Una historia de la desaparición forzada en México, 1940-1980*, by Camilo Vicente Ovalle, Bonilla Artigas Editores, 2019.

Introduction

Although none of the books under review here examine post-2000 developments, much less current affairs, they all make fascinating contributions to contextualize them. Gillingham's book for example deals amply with the evolution of civil-military arrangements during the formative years of Mexico's unique one-party regime. In view of recent trends of re-militarization, the topic is clearly relevant. Considering today's pervasive (criminal) violence and insecurity the works of Kloppe-Santamaría, Padilla, and Vicente Ovalle offer valuable context. The first states her work originated in an interest to elucidate Mexico's present-day challenges through the lenses of lynching; historical and present-day lynching share similar scripts and motives. Nowadays, the fate of over 100 thousand

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disappearances, the subject of Vicente Ovalle's historical overview, sheds a dark cloud over the country. For many observers, the 43 disappeared Ayotzinapa-students epitomise this painful reality. Tanalís Padilla's social and political history of the rural *normales* (teachers' boarding schools) – Ayotzinapa being one of them – is a timely contribution. Henson's study of socio-economic exclusion, violence, and agrarian revolt in the sierras of Chihuahua during the 1960s provides useful background information about the region's current predicament.

These books all deal with the critical developments and increasingly glaring contradictions of the social, economic, and political system that evolved out of the Mexican revolution, as well as with the (violent) responses of elites and popular groups. The Mexican revolution was about social justice, political inclusion, and redistributive development, but by the 1960s an 'unrevolutionary' politics (Gillingham) was in place, in which lynching and other extra-legal practices of social control were significant (Kloppe-Santamaría), which shackled popular revolutionary longings, produced its own 'unintended lessons' (Padilla), and generated social and political conflict, repression and armed resistance (Vicente Ovalle; Henson). Behind these studies lurks the debate about a paradigm shift towards a greater emphasis (than assumed before) on the role of coercion and violence in Mexican state-making, politics, and society after 1940. In terms of historical focus, Gillingham and Kloppe-Santamaría prioritize the 1940s and 1950s, (when the 'strange dictatorship' evolved), while Henson and Vicente Ovalle mainly examine the following decades when conflicts deepened, and repression and violence proliferated. Padilla's study examines the development of rural normales between the 1920s and 1980s.

Gema Kloppe-Santamaría's fascinating study *In the Vortex of Violence* concentrates on the (local) social, political and cultural conditions behind lynching. Based on archives and newspapers she examines hundreds of cases during the 1930s-1950s, mainly from central Mexico, categorizes them and presents representative descriptions of this 'collective, public, and particularly cruel form of violence aimed at punishing individuals considered offensive or threatening by a given group or community' (p. 3). Lynching should be understood as shaped by and shaping politics and power within communities and in interactions with broader societal forces. In this context, the features of state-making in this crucial period play a significant role. She criticizes approaches of lynching as above all a weapon of the weak or a top-down instrument of repression (as in racially informed lynching in the United States). In postrevolutionary Mexico, lynching was mostly informed by defensive politics aimed at preserving the communities' dominant values, beliefs, and practices. And yet, despite its illegality lynching was also widely perceived as legitimate justice-making.

The latter is related to moral scripts that frame particular actors as threats to cultural or material community interests. What constitutes danger? Where does it come from? What are the sources of anxieties? How do they impact the organization, legitimation and scripts of lynching practices? This rich study answers these questions. Kloppe-Santamaría divides the more than 300 cases into four

categories (and chapters), brings in relevant actors and processes and examines diverse historical trends. Chapters about the state, religion, crime, and witchcraft form the heart of the book. The first examines the impact of post-revolutionary state-making on lynching practices. It deals with lynching as resistance to state-led modernization projects perceived as unwelcome encroachment on communities (represented by federal teachers, engineers, and tax collectors). But the author also discusses lynching as 'corrective justice' for abusive and unjust behaviour of police, soldiers, mayors, and *caciques*. To complicate matters, she also includes state-sanctioned lynching, in which local authorities instigated extra-legal violence against alleged criminals or political opponents. While changes in federal policies led to a decline of the first modality from the late 1940s onwards, the second continued well into the 1950s, whereas the third acquired more covert -grey-zone- forms. The chapter about the impact of (popular) religion on lynching looks at community defence of religious symbols and objects against thieves and acts of blasphemy, but also at how confrontational Catholic discourses aimed at followers of other creeds – Protestantism and leftist ideologies – paved the way for violent lynch mobs. Though religiously motivated, political and material interests were always involved, as were local parish priests. The book then looks at how public understandings of crime, justice, and punishment shaped the lynching of alleged criminals and shows their justifications in terms of the brutality of crimes and/or the ineffectiveness of the justice system. On both grounds, equally brutal lynching was framed as a 'reasonable response' by enraged citizens and *nota roja* reporters. Public opinion and not the law shaped the verdict of these alleged criminals. This modality of lynching persisted across the period studied. Finally, *In the Vortex of Violence* explores how 'mythical beliefs' incited ruthless mob violence against witches, bloodsuckers and others suspected of commanding dark magical powers. In 1930, for example, a Norwegian geologist was lynched after accusations of abducting children to extract their body fat to power aeroplanes. Such incidents are related to earthly anxieties regarding modernization and political tensions and take the form of scapegoating people marginal or external to communities. This gruesome but fascinating material demonstrates Kloppe-Santamaría's talent for cultural interpretation and political economic contextualization.

This book shows that Mexico's current security crisis is rooted in long-term state-making processes with coercion and violence as its epicentre as well as in citizens' enduring understandings and practices of extra-legal violence as acceptable forms of justice. As such it recalibrates the role of violence in post-revolutionary Mexico. It moves beyond conceptualizing lynching as either a top-down or a bottom-up practice. Both existed, sometimes simultaneously. Fuelled by the press, in the case of crime, a consensus existed between citizens and authorities. Citizens expressed forceful agency against abusive or neglectful authorities, but also employed ruthless horizontal violence against marginal community members that threatened dominant values. Making sense of this

complexity requires placing lynching in the context of local power and societal change.

Unintended Lessons of Revolution, Tanalís Padilla's study of the dialectic of unmet demands of social justice, state violence, and political radicalism, provides more building blocks for a new historiography. But, as Kloppe-Santamaría, she does much more than that. While Padilla's first book examined land reform and work, her new equally fascinating book studies another crucial pillar of post-revolutionary state-making and societal ordering: education, in particular the rural teacher-training boarding schools (rural *normales*). Padilla makes the co-constitution of land reform, education, state formation, and nation-building abundantly clear: revolutionary state builders trained rural teachers to educate, but also to transform rural (and indigenous) communities (land reform, cultural integration, organizing). During the 1930s, the state and teachers spoke about 'socialist education'. Padilla's book examines the longevity and the contradictions of this project's legacies. Understanding the practices and policies of the rural normales – curricula, students, their associations and unions, the boarding schools as social and political microcosms – tells a lot about the political management of rural Mexico. For Padilla the rural *normales* best represent the nationalist, inclusionary, and social justice demands of the Mexican revolution.

The book draws on an impressive amount of primary data: archives from rural *normales*, ministries, intelligence agencies, and newspapers, but also dozens of interviews with former students and teachers. To grasp the lifeworld of the young boys and girls in the spartan boarding schools Padilla even read their term papers. The quality of the scholarship especially shines when dealing with *normalista* student and teacher activism in terms of the construction of a social identity that generated its own mythologies, and shaped the memories of participants, and the perceptions of state spies. It is also evident in the richly textured treatment of gender relations among students. Reviewing educational reforms, school regulations, conflict negotiations, and doctrinaire debates is, understandably, less enthralling, though not less important.

The book argues that the revolutionary project of social justice and the legal and institutional infrastructure built to achieve it, laid the groundwork for forming rural teachers as engaged and politicized community leaders, who, as national elites started to steer towards the right from the 1940s onwards, soon developed an antagonistic position towards the state. While post-war activism of *normalista* students originated in struggles to improve the material conditions of their schools and defend their survival – many were actually closed –, they were always connected to broader social struggles. In this context, Padilla highlights an interesting political logic in terms of the expansive role of educators (land distribution, union, and peasant organizing), expansive political consciousness (connecting student, *agrarista*, student, labour, gender and ethnic identities), and expansive notions of democracy (articulating economic and political rights). She concludes that '[E]phemeral in its implementation, socialist education was expansive in its legacy…' (p. 253). In time, expansive social and political

articulations elicited repression. Framed by Cold War mobilizations and narratives and by new revolutionary discourses (Cuba), it propelled radicalization. Within the combative *normalista* student federation and the schools themselves, 'guerrilla groups found support as well as fertile recruiting ground' (p. 233). One chapter studies the events that led up to the guerrilla attack on a military base in Madera (Chihuahua) in 1965 – the subject of Henson's book –, in which *normalista* students and rural teachers actively participated. Another investigates armed resistance headed by rural teachers in 1970s Guerrero. The book critically revises the dominant view that student movements were, above all, an urban phenomenon.

Unintended Lessons of Revolution weaves together histories of school life, personal biographies, national politics, and international developments. Enriching the debate her first book helped shape, the author concludes that recent scholarly work has produced a false dichotomy of Mexico's one-party regime as featuring either limited and hidden repression or more widespread and open coercion and understands that regime as 'staunchly repressive and remarkably flexible' (p. 15). And yet, since the book opens and ends with the tragic killing and forced disappearance of Ayotzinapa *normalistas* in 2014 and because of what it tells us about the history of the rural *normales*, a dark undercurrent runs through it. This important book provides readers with a broad historical, political, and cultural canvas that puts the Ayotzinapa tragedy in perspective.

In March 1964, Salomón Gaytán shot and killed Florentino Ibarra, brother of the infamous local henchman José Ibarra, in Madera, Chihuahua. He did so in retaliation for Ibarra killing an indigenous activist four years before. Remarkably, a few weeks later Gaytán sent a letter to the mayor of Madera to explain the deed: 'The fundamental reason is that we are convinced the authorities do not wish to resolve the people's problems…, but instead they harass those who ask for work and land and repress the people's movements for justice with violence' (Henson, 2019, p. 102-103). In December 1964, Gaytán, as Chief of Operations, and Arturo Gámiz, as Political Chief of the recently founded Grupo Popular Guerrillero (GPG) signed a public letter to Chihuahua's governor, in which they demanded social justice and threatened to use violence against security forces. On 23 September 1965, thirteen GPG *guerrilleros* assaulted the military barracks in Madera. Eight were killed, among them Gaytán and Gámiz.

Elizabeth Henson's *Agrarian Revolt* examines the processes that led up to the Madera assault, and explains why it failed. Her book is inspired by a critique of 'the teleological collapse into a narrative focused on the guerrilla' (p. 5), and therefore concentrates on prior social and political struggles of *serrano* peasants, teachers, and students. Since the end of the 1950s, they engaged in land invasions, marches, occupation of government offices, and student strikes, thereby forming new political subjectivities. Women played important roles. The authorities responded with everything from bureaucratic foot-dragging to repression; much dirty work was done by strongmen such as the Ibarra's. Those struggling for the fulfilment of revolutionary promises (land above all) faced a strong

coalition of political elites, neo-latifundistas, timber and mining interests, and local *caciques*. *Serrano* small-holders possessed a tradition of armed self-defence. The contradictions of Mexico's post-war social and political development manifested themselves particularly strongly in Chihuahua. In chapters about the national and regional context, Henson introduces the key players: national peasant organizations, state authorities, and influential business interests, most importantly Bosques de Chihuahua, the company that received a huge fifty-year concession during the last days of the notoriously corrupt Alemán administration (1946-1952). The expansion of timbering inevitably led to conflicts with small-holder settlers.

The central part of the book examines the formation and features of social and political subjects and their leaders. It shows how small-holders, teachers, and students (of the rural *normales*, and the cities) built coalitions and engaged in innovative protests, and how their movements were drawn into an escalating dialogue with increasingly repressive authorities, and how some leaders were captivated by Cuban *foquismo*. In Henson's account, the latter shift is represented by the move of some leaders to Mexico City for training and political study, disconnecting themselves from their social base: 'the GPG began as an embryonic people in arms and transformed itself into a vanguard…Their taking up arms disarmed the broad movements that gave rise to them' (p. 202). Despite some rather descriptive sections, this book is a useful and interesting case study of the regional complexities of pre-1968 radical contestation and political articulations between sierras and cities, that involved local traditions of self-defence, *agrarista* demand-making, *normalista* activism, Marxist political learning, and, in the end, *guerrilla* vanguardism. Above all, it shows the violent realities of the Chihuahuan western *sierras* during the 1960s. Their current inhabitants do not fare much better.

The significance of Madera is corroborated by Camilo Vicente Ovalle's history of forced disappearance in Mexico, *[Tiempo suspendido]*. Immediately after it, the *Dirección Federal de Seguridad* (DFS) formed the specialized unit C-047 charged with gathering information about this new armed political dissidence and its social support networks. It is a key moment in the formation of a counterinsurgency complex that included detention and forced disappearance. This practice did not suddenly turn up in the midst of Cold War polarization. The author identifies a history of 'primitive' forms of forced disappearance and convincingly shows how by the mid-1970s through learning, specialization, and eventually institutionalization and bureaucratization, forced disappearance had become a full-blown component of the counterinsurgency complex. Crucial is the shift from forced disappearance as a tactic to extract information from detained suspects to a strategy of elimination. Based on archival material and interviews with survivors from three cases (Oaxaca, Sinaloa, Guerrero) the book has two objectives: to examine the broader historical dynamics that shaped the development of forced disappearance and to identify the features and operational logic of detention-forced disappearance. The second is the most innovative.

Although the author rightfully complains that access to '*archivos de la represión*' is still limited and governed by regulations that prevent knowing 'the intimacy of the state', he amassed a wealth of documents, newspaper sources and interviews. He distinguishes three phases. In the first, primitive phase (1940-ca. 1970), disappearance (transitory or permanent) was employed against a range of regime opponents, including dissident members of the revolutionary elite. The critical feature of the second phase is the articulation of forced disappearance with the counterinsurgency complex focused on (alleged) radical left-wing movements and armed groups. The author is rather inconsistent in defining the duration of the counterinsurgency period, alternatively mentioning 1968-1985 (p. 26), 1965-1985 (p. 51), 1972-1985 (p. 68), and 1971-1978 (p. 328). Considering the significance of Madera and the book's own evidence, the 1965-ca. 1980 period seems the best option, one that supports Padilla's and Henson's histories of radical contestation and repression that look beyond 1968 Mexico City. The critical feature of the third period, from the late 1970s to the mid-1980s is the growing intersection between counterinsurgency and counternarcotics operations. The case of Sinaloa clearly illustrates this point. *[Tiempo suspendido]* is above all a book about the second phase.

The sociological analysis of the main features and horrors of the 'detention-disappearance circuit' is fascinating. The circuit – part of the counterinsurgency complex – consists of three 'procedures': apprehension, detention, and resolution. The book argues that the circuit depended on growing (intelligence) expertise and coordination between security agencies and the legal system. This was not an 'illegal' system, but one incorporated in the state, albeit partially (often literally) in 'hidden' ways. The logistical infrastructure consisted of transportation facilities, safe houses, and clandestine prisons, mainly in military barracks. The author discusses the systematic use of torture based on the graphically told experiences of survivors. Being locked up in the dungeons of Mexico's security agencies and subjected to physical and psychological cruelty suspended the victim's sense of time, space, sociality, and personality. According to state scripts, it was a way to extort information and 'confessions' from victims. Uncertainty permeated everything. The resolution about the fate of the disappeared could be 'elimination', transfer to the formal prison system or even release. In the mid-1970s the probability of survival sharply declined. The analysis is pertinent but would have benefitted from scholarly work on e.g. Argentina. Most important, however, is that forced disappearance, pertaining to the darkest areas of state- and regime-building in post-war Mexico, is now the subject of systematic scholarly enquiry. The book increases our knowledge of the state's coercive and violent pillar. In the last fifteen years, forced disappearance has dramatically returned. Just as during the Cold War, today's Drug War-related forced disappearances traumatize people and society. And just as in the 1970s, they prompt vigorous demands for truth and justice.

Paul Gillingham's *Unrevolutionary Mexico* is undoubtedly the most wide-ranging and ambitious of the books under review here. Its central objective is to

describe and explain how the revolution grew into *dictablanda*, that curious Mexican blend of hard and soft power, of hegemonic and coercive state-making and political control, and of negotiated state-society relations in politics, the economy, and culture. The author achieves his goals with flying colours. There are several reasons for that. The first concerns the original setup of the book: the first part contains regional social and political histories of Veracruz and Guerrero: two chapters on the six decades or so between 1880 and 1945, and another two for the decade between 1945 and 1955, the period about which the core arguments of the book are constructed. This part provides a historical narrative, the second consists of thematic analyses of the crucial mid-twentieth century conjuncture based on the narrative, and with excursions into other parts of Mexico, about elections and fraud, (political) violence and law and order, development, corruption and state capacity, cultural control and nation-building, and, finally, civil-military arrangements. The combination of multiregional history and thematic analysis works brilliantly. It provides rich details, stories, and an incredible range of personalities and testimonies, but at the same time an analytical focus on causation and the broader forces behind the shift towards authoritarianism.

The second reason is that Gillingham employs the relatively straightforward Gramscian notions of force and consent as his main conceptual tool. Mindful of the paradigm shift mentioned before and the debate about Mexican exceptionalism he argues that the absence of a military take-over in Mexico does not mean no similarities exist with other Latin American countries in terms of violent repression (see the other books reviewed here). Civilian elites ruled since 1946, but the military negotiated considerable autonomy and power. Elections at all levels regulated the transition of power but came often with arm-twisting or worse. Still, citizens were able to shape the outcomes. The state exercised cultural control through schools, media, and entertainment, yet popular groups were able to push back in numerous ways, including with violence (cf. Kloppe-Santamaría). Federal state capacity grew, yet key weaknesses remained (fiscal revenues, political management, intelligence), and grassroots resistance persisted. Gillingham convincingly argues that the key feature of this regime was the art of balancing between force and consent. The argumentative style that supports this is 'there is this or that, yet…'. Ambiguity is the heart of the matter. While force and consent constitute the key analytical axis, time and space complement and enrich the approach: the shifting and negotiated relationship between force and consent depends on (sub)regional social realities and changes through time.

The third reason concerns Gillingham's central historical argument: the Mexico of 1955 critically differs from that of 1945. During this decade, which corresponds with the power of Miguel Alemán – as interior minister, president, and an influential ex-president –, 'a new and very different regime coalesced' through 'fundamental shifts in the exercise of violence, the conduct and results of elections, prevailing economic models, the practices of corruption, and the ambitions and actions of the military' (pp. 6, 277-278). These changes largely

overcame the country's instability and uncertainty of much of the 1940s. Gillingham disputes the idea that a strong one-party system and (federal) state were already in place since the *cardenista* reforms and the foundation of the corporatist party of the revolution in the 1930s. Evidence from the Guerrero and Veracruz narratives and beyond is overwhelming and persuasive. Elections, (state) violence, development, corruption, military influence, and culture, in all these domains key transformations occurred. During most of the 1940s, elections were competitive if flawed until the PRI abolished the primaries in 1950, paving the way for the 'disillusionment of a competitive authoritarian ending' (p. 159). And yet, the 'consent-seeking side of the *dictablanda* endured' (p. 286). Following the 1948 peso devaluation a military coup appeared feasible, but by 1955 the army's autonomy was constrained, *pistolero* violence curtailed, and the free market of violence reduced, mainly because of the creation of professional police forces. A new generation of (civilian) leaders emerged. Social and economic development opened opportunities, although inequality increased over time. A key role is played by what Gillingham calls 'the informal senate' of former military presidents, especially Lázaro Cárdenas, which prevented the military coup in 1948, and blocked Alemán's bid for re-election in 1952, while simultaneously backing the reduction of democratic spaces.

Finally, this book is written in a compelling and imaginative style, drawing the reader close to fascinating characters such as *pistolero* Crispín Aguilar, military *cacique* Alejandro Mange, and dozens of villagers, whose voices were recorded in the archives, such as a man from Xalostoc, Guerrero, who said that fellow villagers were 'not very murderous, although they were always killing each other' (p. 166). A talented writer, Gillingham effortlessly weaves the voices of small-town actors into larger arguments on national trends and presidential politics. It is a great read! And yet, to pay homage to the book's frequently used rhetorical device, there is its puzzling and perhaps misleading title *Unrevolutionary Mexico. The Birth of a Strange Dictatorship.* At the outset, the book defends the notion of *dictablanda*, but quickly seems to drop it in favour of 'strange dictatorship'. But the concept of 'dictatorship', however strange, is deeply imbued with meanings associated with force, coercion, and violence. Is there a subtext? The idea of the shift from 'revolutionary to unrevolutionary' Mexico refutes much of what this book is about: without questioning Gillingham's key historical argument, during most of the twentieth century 'revolutionary Mexico' remained tangible, present in its institutions (Padilla's rural *normales*), laws, and political culture, that is in the minds of millions of Mexicans. The coexistence of revolutionary and unrevolutionary Mexico perhaps best expresses the ambiguities that have long defined the country's politics, state and citizens.

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