

Book Review

– *Violence and the Caste War of Yucatán*, by Wolfgang Gabbert, Cambridge University Press, 2019

The Caste War of Yucatán started in 1847 and lasted through the second half of the nineteenth century. It was depicted by the reigning Mexican/Yucatecan oligarchy as an insurrection of the *castas* (for the most part, Mayan communities). The outpost of “occidental” civilization, according to this view, had to be defended against the attack of barbarous natives. A more recent interpretation has tried to turn the tables and understand the insurrection essentially as an ethnic revitalisation movement. However, both dichotomic views of the conflict have been overruled by the research of the last decades. It has been firmly established that the question of agency is much more complex than previously acknowledged and that Indians, as well as non-Indians, fought and died on both sides of this civil war.

After having made a significant contribution to this debate in his former book *Becoming Maya* (University of Arizona Press, 2004), Gabbert this time deals with the role of violence in the Caste War. Surprisingly, the nature and extent of that violence have not previously been the subject of a specific analysis, even though all studies of the war bear testimony to its excessive cruelty and bloodshed. Gabbert starts his study by setting out his own approach to the phenomenon of violence, drawing on a wide range of sociological and anthropological theories. He insists that the endemic generalization of violence cannot be explained as exceptional breakouts of uncontrolled passions like hate, revenge etc. Gabbert rather sees violence as a repetitive, everyday possibility of social action which, in many cases, shows a great deal of purposeful rationale. Acts of violence are so frequent because they are easily accessible and can be carried out without much preparation or equipment. They can also enhance the cohesion of one’s group and serve many other practical purposes. In other words, Gabbert develops a rather pragmatic, down-to-earth approach which he puts to test in the analysis of the distressing, often seemingly chaotic, acts of violence in the Caste War.

The Mexican government forces were notorious for their scorched-earth strategy, their greedy looting and contemptuous treatment of the hated rebels.

Prisoners were immediately executed or condemned to forced labour, in many cases also sold as slaves to Cuban plantation owners. The officers took part in the outspoken elite racism of their time and also took their share in the booming war economy. Gabbert documents this sordid picture with an impressive amount of primary sources and completes it with a meticulous account of the internal violence within the army. No wonder that, to some observers, the army resembled “a large penal institution”.

The most interesting parts of the book are the chapters which Gabbert dedicates to the analysis of the so-called Kruso’b rebels who had taken refuge in the eastern and southern regions of Yucatán. This society was formed by Maya and *mestizo* peasants from the central part of the peninsula, supplemented by a continuous drain of deserters from the government troops. They called themselves Kruso’b in reference to the enigmatic cult of the “speaking cross”, which was practised in their little capital Chan Santa Cruz. Gabbert provides many insights into the structure of a rural society which, up to now, has attracted more myth and speculation than sober analysis. There can be no doubt that the peasants had conquered freedom in fundamental aspects of their existence: They had free access to land and were no longer subject to taxation, labour coercion, religious fees or military recruitment. Gabbert nevertheless does not run across many attractive features of a “liberated territory”. Instead, he draws the rather sobering picture of a poor and isolated society which could hardly maintain its own reproduction. The improvised trade with the neighbouring British colony of Belize could not make up either for the distressing lack of essential goods of all sorts.

This society could not avoid being involved in violence to a surprising degree. In the first place, the Kruso’b society originated under the condition of permanent war. No doubt, the Kruso’b had to defend themselves against the attacks by government troops, which went on for decades. A close look at their counterattacks shows, however, that these actions were not only directed against the outposts and detachments of the military but also at the defenceless farms and hamlets in the contact zone. Obviously, the rebels were determined not only to demonstrate their defence capacity but also to secure a worthwhile haul of badly-needed goods and tools. These raids were accompanied by massacres of non-combatants which often earned the rebels a deep hatred from other parts of the regional population, often also of Mayan origin. Gabbert can base this specific assertion on a significant number of newly found reports and primary sources. He also traces the long-term development of what could be called the acquisitive nature of violence on the side of the rebels and finds out that it even continued in periods when the deadly threat from the army had become less acute.

Gabbert also indicates that the egalitarian social order of the Kruso’b could not escape a rudimentary stratification process. He testifies to the rise of competing leadership groups, and political infighting becomes visible which took on the form of internal violence. Gabbert even talks of *caudillismo* in the sense of Wolf and Hansen. If this classification is meant to be more than a general

observation, a lot of questions remain open, especially how the Kruso'b differed from the national, state-controlled structures they were rebelling against.

Gabbert's book is an impressive effort to analyse the forms of violence in the second, long-lasting phase of the Caste War and to make this long struggle more accessible to comparative social research. His work is informed by a theoretical approach to the phenomenon of violent behaviour in social conflicts and commands a detailed, meticulous knowledge of historical documentation. His explanation of the proliferation of violence on both sides of the conflict, and its devastating consequences, is not only a major contribution to the history of the Caste War, but also opens new perspectives for the historical sociology of violence.

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