Mexico: Landmines Everywhere – A Book Review Essay

written by Dan La Botz | February 13, 2015

Robert Joe Stout. *Hidden Dangers: Mexico on the Brink of Disaster.* Sunbury Press: Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania, 2014. 209 pages. Notes. Bibliography.

Shannon K. O'Neil. *Two Nations Indivisible: Mexico, the United States, and the Road Ahead*. A council on Foreign Relations Book. Oxford University Press, 2014 [2013]. 239 page. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Map.

"Mexico is undergoing economic and political changes that lie like landmines ready to explode beneath the troubled and often discordant impulses of the two countries to satisfy their divergent social and political needs," writes Robert Joe Stout in *Hidden Dangers: Mexico on the Brink of Disaster.*

And he lists the landmines he sees: "Migration, legal and illegal…Intrusion of drug organizations into economic an political activities…Grassroots political movements opposed to globalization, centralized government, and unequal distribution of wealth are being repressed often violently…Government and entrepreneurial corruption…Environmental disaster and the collapse of self-sustaining agriculture."

Stout's subtitle, *Brink of Disaster*, certainly captures the sense that many have at this moment. Some of the landmines are already exploding. The September 26, 2014 events in Iguala, Guerrero where six were killed, 25 wounded, and 43 disappeared—the kidnapping victims have still not appeared and are believed by many to be dead—led to demonstrations especially in Guerrero, but also throughout all of Mexico. The photos of the 43 students of the Ayotzinapa Teachers College, forcibly disappeared, finally put a face on the tens of thousands of killings and kidnappings that have taken place since 2006. Then came the revelations about the conflict of interest involved in the luxurious homes of Mexican Enrique Peña Nieto and his wife Angélica Rivera and Finance Minister Luis Videgaray which they had acquired from corporations doing business with their Mexican government. All of this as the Mexican economy stagnated, oil prices fell, and the peso lost value. Things in Mexico looked bleak, including the lack of any left movement that might propose a genuine political and economic alternative.

On the eve of this crisis two authors published books anticipating it. Yet one could hardly imagine two works more different than Stout's and Shannon K. O'Neil's. Stout, who lives in Oaxaca, Mexico is a journalist with a critical outlook who closely examines developments in Mexican society, providing detailed accounts of the migration issue, the war on drugs, popular protest, corruption, and environmental issues. He is interested in the nitty-gritty. O'Neil is a policy wonk. She provides

broad, sweeping, but also well informed accounts of many of the very same issues, but looking at the political alternatives at the highest level.

Stout is implicitly critical of the establishment, while O'Neil wants to be one a handmaiden of the powerful. If Stout provides us little reason to hope, O'Neil hopes that contemporary neoliberal capitalism's reforms—such as those proposed by Peña Nieto and passed by the Mexican Congress will—will bring about peace and prosperity, a possibility, she believes, if only the United States government will work more closely with its Mexican counterparts to achieve the construction of a liberal democracy a functioning justice system, and some sort of immigration reform through new diplomatic efforts. Though O'Neil wants to be optimistic, one is struck frequently by her deeply critical views of the Mexican system (less so of the American) and wonders how she could remain hopeful that diplomacy might bring about significant change.

Both of these books in their different ways reveal and explain that the immigration problems remain intractable, the border and security issues unresolved, the justice system utterly corrupt, and the situation of ordinary Mexicans increasingly miserable. Popular protest, discussed by Stout but not by O'Neil, is, as he says, being criminalized. The environment, also on Stout's list but not on O'Neil's, continues to be devastated because of government's economic development policies and industry's lack of concern with anything but profit.

Unfortunately, Stout, who looks closely as social developments, including popular protest, doesn't do more than sketch out the recent history of the movements, providing us no sense of their significance, their social goals, their political programs, and their leaderships. O'Neil, whose focus is on the economic and political elites of both nations, for whom she is writing, and from whom she hopes for diplomatic alternatives, has nothing to say about social movements at the base of Mexican society, a serious omission from her otherwise inclusive study. Francisco Goldman, the novelist and writer for the *New Yorker* suggested in a recent aricle that ,"In December revolution seemed possible in Mexico." But no revolution was on the agenda then, nor is it now, for there is no left force capable of providing the political or organizational leadership for a revolutionary movement. Nor, has the Mexican state reached its breaking point, the Mexican ruling class exhausted its possibilities, or the Mexican people reached their limit.

O'Neil, while supporting Peña Nieto's neoliberal economic reforms and looking with hope toward the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), seems to think that they are compatible with some sort of Keynesian approach, a kind of social liberalism as this has been called in Brazil. She writes;

> "If Mexico can better the lives of its poorest and strengthen its middle class, benefits for all will follow. Its economy will grow faster; its democracy will be stronger. It will boost its international standing, carving out a prominent place for itself as one of the few emerging economies to transform itself into a developed nation. But if no, the country will stagnate economically, politically, and socially, proving the pessimists right while harming the interests of the majority."

Yet there is no proposal in Mexico for such economic and political reforms that would lift all boats. The pessimists it seems are right at least for the moment.

I have no doubt that O'Neil's book, a product of the Council on Foreign Relations and the Oxford University Press, will end up in all the major academic and big city public libraries, as well as being used in university political science courses. Stout's *Hidden Dangers*, published by the small Sunbury Press will have a harder go of it, but it should also find its way into the libraries and would be an excellent book for college courses. If a reader asked me to choose between the two, I would say read Stout, because he has his eye on humble people, their miseries but also their potential, and I believe

that that is where change will have to come from, while O’Neil is too close to the men in fine suits and limousines, with their respective flag pins in their lapels, to recognize the road that they and she are on. The road leads to another common grave in the State of Guerrero filled with unidentified human remains.