A PEOPLE'S HISTORY OF THE MEXICAN REVOLUTION

written by Dan La Botz | August 10, 2013

Book Review of Stuart Easterling. *The Mexican Revolution: A Short History, 1910-1920.* Chicago: Haymarket, 2012. Ilustrations. Chronology. Index. Notes. 167 pp.

The Mexican Revolution—dated variously from 1910 to 1920 or from 1906 – 1940—was an enormous, long, and complicated series of events encompassing conflicts between a dictator and those who wanted democracy, between landlords and peasants and between factory owners and workers, as well as involving shifting alliances between rival revolutionary bands. We have all heard some of the names of the most famous revolutionary leaders—Francisco Madero, Pancho Villa, Emiliano Zapata, Venustiano Carranza, and Álvaro Obregón—though the forces they represented and the programs they fought for may have eluded us. While beginning in northern Mexico, the revolution eventually spread throughout the country as armies of tens of thousands clashed, leaving one million dead while another million migrated to the United States. The great upheaval swept away the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz and *los científicos*, the small coterie of hacienda owners, industrialists and professionals who surrounded him, together with the crony capitalism that they had created. Out of the revolution rose a new elite of revolutionary generals who through their populist program and reforms won the support of peasants and workers and succeeded in creating a more broadly based and remarkably stable capitalist state.

Though the most violent stage of the revolution ended in 1920, militant agrarian reform movements, workers strikes, and political protests continued into the 1930s. Finally, during the presidency of Lázaro Cárdenas (1934-40), the revolutionary government fulfilled the revolution's goals: the hacienda virtually disappeared as ten million acres of land were distributed to peasants, labor unions were recognized, and the foreign owned petroleum industry was nationalized. Yet at the same time Cárdenas incorporated into the ruling revolutionary party the army, the peasants' leagues, workers' and public employees' unions, and the organizations of the self-employed, creating a corporate party that evolved into the authoritarian and corrupt Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) that ruled Mexico until 2000 and, after a 12 year hiatus, rules Mexico today.

Stuart Easterling does a very fine job of telling this complicated story in an extremely economical way in *The Mexican Revolution: A Short History, 1910-1920*, fleshing it out with a few anecdotes that give us a feel for life at the time, some thumbnail sketches of revolutionary leaders, and most important an explanation of the social forces that they represented. (1) (This is not an easy task as I know from my own attempts.) The historic photographs and woodcuts complement the text nicely. With its large type and generous leading, the book is an easy read.

As the writing shows and the endnotes confirm the author has a command of the extensive literature of the Mexican Revolution, yet the book is written in a popular style; it is a kind of "people's history" of the Mexican Revolution, without academic or political jargon. It is the kind of book one could use in a college survey course in Latin American History or in a study group for young activists interested in knowing about this tremendously important revolution that took place in North America only a century ago. It is a good introduction to the subject for the general reader.

Since it is a popular book, Easterling addresses himself to really popular misconceptions about Mexican history and history in general, such as what might be called "the Great Man theory." He

points out that some historians try to explain the Mexican revolution in terms of the striking characters and personalities of leaders: the naïveté of Madero, the integrity of Zapata, or the volatility of Villa. Less important than their personalities, argues Easterling, was their relationship to the social groups of which they were a part: Madero's connection to the landowners and businessmen who had been excluded from the dictator's inner circle, Zapata's rootedness in the peasantry of the State of Morelos, and Villa's experience among the bandits, ranchers, and workers of the North.

The Mexican Revolution has raised many fascinating questions. Easterling only spends much time on one: Why didn't the *campesinos* take power? Following Adolfo Gilly (more about him below), he argues that the peasants and ranchers could not overcome their parochialism and develop a national strategy. Another important question, that Easterling does not discuss, is: What was the nature of the group that actually seized power? Manuel Aguilar Mora argued in his *El Bonapartismo Mexicano* (1982) that, when peasants, workers and the capitalist class proved incapable of taking power, a Bonapartist figure, first Álvaro Obregón and then his successor Plutarco Elías Calles, took power, balancing above all of the classes.

Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels had developed this analysis earlier to explain the coming to power of Louis Napoleon Bonaparte in France and also used it to analyze Otto von Bismarck's Germany. While Mexico had a capitalist economy, Aguilar Mora suggested, it did *not* have a capitalist ruling class. Nora Hamilton looked at this idea of the relative autonomy of the state from social classes in her book *The Limits of State Autonomy: Post-Revolutionary Mexico* also published in 1982. For political activists in Mexico, one's attitude toward the Mexican state was all important. The Mexican Communist Party (PCM), later the Unified Socialist Party of Mexico (PSUM), and Lombardo Toledano's Popular Socialist Party (PPS) suggested that the Mexican state should be supported and pushed to fulfill its revolutionary potential, while the Trotskyist Revolutionary Workers Party argued that the state should be opposed and overthrown. Perhaps, by simply writing a narrative, Easterling missed a chance to raise some important theories about the nature of revolutions.

Nor does Easterly have anything to say about the historiography of the Mexican Revolution, which is a fascinating one which even novice might like to know something about, at least in broad outlines. Frank Tannenbaum, a former member of the Industrial Workers of the World who became a historian, first argued to the American public that Mexico had had a genuine social and political revolution in his book *Peace by Revolution: An Interpretation of Mexico* (1933). It was he suggested a progressive revolution that had expanded democracy and created a more just society. Reissued as a paperback in 1966, Tannenbaum's book was the standard text and the common dog-eared textbook into the 1970s.

Then in the conservative 1980s regional studies began to dissolve the Mexican Revolution into a series of local events while, particularly in European studies, post-modern attacks on the very idea revolution—bourgeois or socialist—and the rejection of narratives of social progress, tended to undermine the whole enterprise. Many young academics came to reject economic and social explanations or the idea of revolution altogether. Revolutions? Some said, there never were any. Other said, oh, yes, there were, but they'd all gone bad, inevitably. This was reflected in studies of the Mexican Revolution in Eduardo Ramón Ruiz argued in *The Great Rebellion* (1980) that Mexico's upheaval should not be called a revolution, since the overthrow of a capitalist dictatorship had led to its replacement by….a capitalist dictatorship. A year later Friedrich Katz broke new ground, however, by placing the Mexican Revolution in the context of the machinations of the great imperial powers in *The Secret War in Mexico: Europe, the United States, and the Mexican Revolution* (1981).

Allen Knight weighed in on the debate over the revolution with his exhaustive, two volume *The Mexican Revolution* (1986), synthesizing the enormous academic literature into a powerful argument

that reaffirmed Tannenbaum's claim that indeed, there had been a a political and social revolution in Mexico. At the same time, two other scholars expanded our understanding of the Mexican Revolution by placing it in a longer timeframe and in a broader international context. John Tutino's *From Insurrection to Revolution in Mexico: Social bases of Agrarian Violence, 1750-1940* (1986) suggested that the roots of the Mexican Revolution had to be found in the two-hundred year long struggle of Mexican peasants for the land taken from them by the Spanish conquers and colonizers. A year later, John Mason Hart's *Revolutionary Mexico: The Coming and Process of the Mexican Revolution* (1987) undertook to compare the unfolding of the Mexican Revolution with the experiences of revolutions in Iran, China and Russia.

The trends changed once again in the 1990s from this focus on social classes, revolutionary processes, and the state with what has been called post-modern cultural turn in Mexican Revolution studies, as exemplified in the collection of essays titled *Everyday forms of state formation: revolution and the negotiation of rule in modern Mexico* (1995) edited by Gilbert M. Joseph and Daniel Nugent.

One of the peculiarities of American academic scholarship is that it tended to ignore Mexican writing on the Mexican Revolution. Back in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Adolfo Gilly, the Argentine born revolutionary sat in his cell in the Lecumberri Prison, jailed for his role in the 1968 political protests. While in prison he wrote *La Revolución interrumpida, Mexico, 1910-1920: una guerra campesina por la tierra y el poder* (1971), a Marxist analysis of the Mexican Revolution that had an enormous impact on the subject in Mexico. What made the book so fascinating at the time was its footnotes citing the texts by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels that were used to elucidate Mexico' revolutionary experience. Octavio Paz, the most famous Mexican writer, essayist and poet of the time stopped the presses on a forthcoming book in order to include a chapter review Gilly's book. Not until 2005 was Gilly's important history published in English under the title *The Mexican Revolution* by the New Press; in 2006 New Press reissued it as part of it Peoples History Series.

Easterling has written a fine introductory book, though we will still turn to Gilly for its explicitly Marxist interpretation and to Knight for the encyclopedic account. For those who after reading Easterling might want to take a somewhat deeper plunge in this pool, I would recommend Michael J. Gonzáles's *The Mexican Revolution, 1910-1940* (2002), also an introduction, though at 307 pages about twice as long as Easterling's.

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1. Easterling's history first appeared in three successive issues of the *International Socialist Review*, number 74, 75 and 76.