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RESEÑA/REVIEW

Antonio Escobar Ohmstede and Matthew Butler (eds.), *Mexico in Transition: New Perspectives on Mexican Agrarian History, Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries/México y sus transiciones: reconsideraciones sobre la historia agraria mexicana, siglos XIX y XX (México City: CIESAS/LLILAS, 2013*. Digital edition: http://hdl.handle.net/2152/20399)

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Mexico has one of the greatest traditions of agrarian historiography in the world. Although we can always find more to do, especially given the great geographic diversity of Mexico, dozens and dozens of very intelligent and hardworking people have spent more than a century studying land, water, law, and politics in Mexico. I am not sure how many Mexicans understand how unusual this is. Probably we know more about these questions in Mexico than we do in most parts of the world, because in Mexico this kind of agrarian history is not some backwater only explored by agronomists and geographers. It is considered central to the country's history.

That centrality, of course, stems from the role that rural people had in the Mexican Revolution, both in its armed phase, when rural people with explicit concerns about land, water, and law at times even took over the capital city, and later, when they and other people with similar concerns danced with the post-revolutionary state for decades, often achieving some of their aims.

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The first of the many achievements of the book co-edited by Antonio Escobar Ohmstede and Matthew Butler is to continue that agrarian history, participating in discussions about how the liberal privatization of indigenous lands actually played out in different places before the Revolution, the motives of some rural politicians during the Revolution, and the many very varied ways in which the various reforms made beginning in 1915 were interpreted and carried out in the post-revolutionary period, remaking rural landscapes. Here I would single out the articles by Romana Falcón, Brian Stauffer, Mikael Wolfe, and Diana Birrichiaga for their role in furthering this classical tradition of agrarian history. And here I want to add that when I use the word “tradition” I by no means use it in a disparaging way or denote the traditional with the stodgy or mistaken. Mexico’s tradition of agrarian history is rather wonderful and it is constantly improving through the exploration of new sources and the application of new methodologies to the fundamental questions that it raises, as can clearly be seen in this book.

Yet this book is not simply another contribution to that great tradition of agrarian historiography. Its second contribution, as seen in the many articles that amplify the scope of our vision of the countryside, is to move the discussion more toward something I would call rural, as opposed to simply agrarian, history. The key here is the understanding that land is not just land: we are not talking about homogenous, interchangeable, squares of flat cropland, whether we think of them in square meters, hectares, or acres. The geographic diversity of Mexico means that there are hundreds of microclimates, and different bits of land are used for many different purposes. So we also need to consider, in the words of the book’s coordinators, “diverse forms of land usage, contrasting modes of economic exploitation, and distinctive sets of interactions with the natural world” (p. 33). In this book this turn toward how land is used and even changed is most obvious in the articles that focus on water or forests, including those like the articles of Antonio Escobar or Édgar Mendoza García, which focus on water use, litigation, and legislation, and that of Martín Sánchez Rodríguez, which quite intelligently turns our attention toward the new technologies and ideologies that Mexico actually shared with many places in the world.

What I think this book is also pulling us toward, finally, is a third idea: that a more holistic version of rural history, one that builds on but also amplifies and enriches our legacy of agrarian history, has to take more seriously the importance of labor in rural history. As the book well shows, making land productive required labor, the labor of both men and women, labor that was mostly organized through families with three dimensions, the male-female partnership among adults of prime working age, their intergenerational relationships with their elders and their children, and the wider networks provided extended families of both biological and fictive kin. Distinct microclimates allowed different kinds of products, and each product required specific forms of labor: cowboys and shepherds, seasonal harvesters, people to plow, plant, weed, and process, people to make handicrafts or work in packing sheds. Even when this labor was mobilized by the market and paid wages it was really organized through families, and it responded to the ever-shifting strategies of these families, who often kept one foot in farming for themselves and another foot in the outside labor market. This was and is true even when some members of families migrated near or far to take advantage of opportunities. Some the

articles in this book, like that of Ben Smith, and especially that of Matthew Butler, are definitely leaning in this direction.

The problem is that this part of rural history, the gendered application of labor to rural production, is not as well-documented as land and water are. Land and water have often been the subject of litigation and legislation, and the documentary evidence of that litigation and legislation has been painstaking preserved because the litigation and legislation of the past are crucial to the litigation and legislation of the present. What I am saying is that agrarian history, as complicated as it is to research, is at least relatively well-documented. So where can we find out more about labor and its intimate relationship with the kind of agrarian history we have been doing? How can we begin to explore how people organized their labor, how they applied it, and what obligations they felt like they owed to each other? There are quite a few avenues, and some have been partially explored. It is possible of course to find some hacienda account books with wages and debts, and some have done great work with that, especially when they can supplement it with other records, as Matthew Butler does in his article for this book. Others have begun some interesting work in historical archeology, such as the new book by Elizabeth Therese Newman, Biography of a Hacienda: Work and Revolution in Rural Mexico (Tucson, 2014). Mostly, though, I would say that we need to look for situations in which this labor has been litigated about, for instance in domestic disputes, as Steve Stern pointed out two decades ago, and many people have written about since, or, for instance, in the petitions that families presented when they sought to have a member freed from military conscription. It is going to be a long haul—these documents are not in Mexico City, they are in state archives or district judicial archives or even municipal archives. Still, I think it will be worthwhile. In fact, I suspect that once we know more about how humans worked with each other as well as natural resources, then many of the things they said in the course of discussions of natural resources will make a different kind of sense.