CrossMark

J. Lat. Amer. Stud. 50 (2018). doi:10.1017/S0022216X17001286

Silvia Marina Arrom, *Volunteering for a Cause: Gender, Faith, and Charity in Mexico from the Reform to the Revolution* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 2016), pp. xii + 279, $29.50, pb.

Silvia Arrom begins her important new book on nineteenth-century Catholic lay organising with a dedication to her grandmothers, 'whose devotion to the poor opened [her] eyes to a world that didn't exist in the history books'. Indeed, this history emerged only through serendipity. When Arrom's (Cuban) parents were older than most people live to be, she interviewed them, and discovered that the process of forgetting her grandmothers' labours had begun within their own lifetimes. Only by asking pointed questions did she extract details that seemed unimportant even to the women's own children, who assumed that only male relatives' endeavours were worth remembering and passing on.

Nevertheless, the history of Mexican Catholic lay activists, the overwhelming majority of whom were women, turns out to be critical to understanding the period. It upsets a number of narratives we have inherited about the nineteenth century. Arrom joins a handful of other recent scholars including Kristina Boylan (chapters in Paola Bacchetta and Margaret Power (eds.), *Right-Wing Women: From Conservatives to Extremists around the World*, Taylor and Francis, 2013, and Mary Kay Vaughan, Gabriela Cano and Jocelyn H. Olcott (eds.), *Sex in Revolution: Gender, Politics, and Power in Modern Mexico*, Duke University Press, 2007), Matthew Butler (*Popular Piety and Political Identity in Mexico's Cristero Rebellion: Michoacán, 1927–29*, Oxford University Press, 2004), Patience Schell (*Church and State Education in Revolutionary Mexico City*, University of Arizona Press, 2003) and Laura O'Dogherty Madrazo (*De urnas y sotanas: El Partido Católico Nacional en Jalisco*, CONACULTA, 2001, and *Restaurarlo todo en Cristo: Unión de Damas Católicas Mejicanas, 1920–1926*, Instituto de Investigaciones Históricas, UNAM, 1991) in challenging the Liberal version of events that still dominates most textbooks. In that version, the Liberal victory and subsequent anticlerical reforms, including disentailment, the expulsion of clerical orders, and the shift of responsibilities such as birth, marriage and death registration, education and health care from religious to secular entities, so devastated and discredited the church that it took decades to begin regeneration. Even relatively new scholarship that reinserts women and/or Catholicism back into Mexican history tends to build on this storyline: for example, that Catholic lay organising began to recover only after the papal encyclical *Rerum Novarum* of 1891, or that the Revolution marked the 'defining event that brought women out of the home and sparked their interest in public affairs'. Both the women's and men's sections of the Sociedad de San Vicente de Paúl, however, show that bias, not fact, has motivated much of this familiar narrative.

In truth, nineteenth-century Catholic lay organisations were often reorganised, modernised versions of Colonial ones like the ubiquitous *cofradías* that formed the backbone of civil society for centuries. Catholic activism experienced a resurgence not only during the second Empire, but also thereafter, even during the most severely repressive periods of the Reforma. While social Catholicism did flower after *Rerum Novarum*, that expansion was built on an infrastructure constructed decades earlier. After the expulsion of the orders that had dominated education, health care and social services prior to the Reforma, Catholic lay organisations moved in as government failed to fill the void. Our traditional categories of 'left' and 'right' break down under scrutiny, as Catholic women organised in the public sphere well before

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022216X17001286 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Liberal or revolutionary women did, and Catholics adopted most of the traits we associated with modernity, including even liberal democratic values, in advance of their supposedly more progressive counterparts. Perhaps most importantly, nineteenth-century Catholic lay organising, especially women's organising, laid the foundation for later social and political movements that otherwise would seem to have emerged from nowhere: social Catholicism, turn-of-the century Catholic political organisations, and Catholic resistance to revolutionary administrations in the 1920s and 1930s, including the Cristiada.

The men's Sociedad de San Vicente de Paúl began in 1844 as an affiliate of the French lay organisation of the same name. Fortunately for us, this affiliation necessitated filing annual reports on membership and activities. Originally dominated by members of the clergy, the men's Society weathered the Reforma in part by classifying itself as a secular organisation, a move that permitted dramatic growth precisely during the period when we would most expect to see decline or dissolution. In contrast with the French organisation, which emphasised hands-on care for the indigent, including in-person home visits, Mexican Vincentians favoured larger, more visible projects like hospitals or asylums, which they often established and ran at the behest of the government. The Society continued to expand right up to the point when conventional wisdom would expect it to thrive: membership levelled off during the Porfirian détente between church and state. Arrom rejects the feminisation of piety thesis, however, and postulates that male civic piety, rather than declining, probably adopted different forms. She believes a division of labour developed in which pious men offered money and services to those who came to dominate hands-on social welfare: Catholic women. From its inception in 1863 to 1911, the Ladies of Charity went from a total membership of 1,405 to more than 44,000. This is social activism on a scale women's historians associate with the mid-twentieth century, not the nineteenth. Women's chapters dotted the republic from Chihuahua to Mérida. Importantly, conferences (as the local organisation and lay groups were called) were concentrated in precisely those areas that would later form the locus of political resistance to revolutionary anticlericalism. The Ladies dedicated themselves to caring for the sick and poor, providing religious instruction, burying paupers, encouraging Catholic marriages and baptisms, providing vocational training, and dispensing free medicine and food. In 1866, they spent 29,669 pesos on these activities; by 1911, their expenditures had risen to 250,206 pesos. Increasing poverty and inadequate government social services ensured that many poor suffered without Catholic aid, but these numbers are nonetheless extraordinary. After revolutionary social programmes finally fully professionalised services like education, health care, and welfare, the next generation of middle-class and wealthy Catholic women were actually less likely than their mothers and grandmothers to hold visible, public roles. Thus, this research also disrupts our tendency to ascribe a teleological ascendancy to women's participation in the public sphere over time.

Arrom is careful not to overstate her case. Unlike later social Catholics, Vincentian volunteers reinforced rather than undermined class inequalities. They did not encourage unionisation or other systemic antipoverty measures. Neither was their activity purely charitable, however, in the older, indiscriminate sense of the word. They carefully vetted clients to ensure genuine need. They addressed the root causes of individual and family poverty through education and vocational training. Volunteers received training for their activities that qualified them as semi-professional, and full-time professionals frequently staffed institutions that the conferences sustained. Nineteenth-

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022216X17001286 Published online by Cambridge University Press

century Catholic lay activism can best be described as a bridge between Colonial Catholic charity and two twentieth-century phenomena: fully professionalised social services and social Catholicism.

Carthage College STEPHANIE MITCHELL

J. Lat. Amer. Stud. 50 (2018). doi:10.1017/S0022216X17001304

Terry Rugeley, *The River People in Flood Time: The Civil Wars in Tabasco, Spoiler of Empires* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014), pp. 355, $45.00, hb.

Borges, asked what he thought of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, is supposed to have said that he quite liked the first fifty. Historical epics can pile story upon story until one damn thing after another overwhelms; therein the dangers of the genre. In his new history of Tabasco Terry Rugeley has the baroque material, the storyteller's bent and even the setting, as close to a Guajira as Mexico can offer, to create something of the sort. His book is duly baroque in both style and content, simultaneously wide-ranging and fine-detailed, but it is no chronicle. It is, rather, an exemplar of the analytical, comparative and entertainment potential of the particular. His Gulf Coast characters just want to be left alone, swamp-dwelling *serranos*; in their uphill struggles to achieve regional anti-sociability, however, they provide some much broader insights into Mexican society and its political idiosyncrasy.

Tabascans have, in the argot of international relations or 'peace studies', functioned as spoilers across most of their modern history: in their travails with the three empires of the Spanish, Americans and French – or vice versa, more accurately – they have sooner or later managed to spoil all of their would-be overlords' plans. It is typical of this eclectic work that it should deploy this contemporary practitioners' term (in a brisk and straightforward introduction) before turning to a classical historian's narrative and the pleasures of a richly allusive but unaffected prose. Rugeley draws on an unusual range of references, some explicit – Louisiana and ancient Greece turn out to have a fair bit to say about Tabasco – and others implicit, interweaving, among others, Hemingway, Bolívar, Rabbie Burns and the Ancient Mariner. He has at the same time a flair for the telling metaphor, comparing indigenous ceremonies to office parties (both rituals to ensure that 'village hatreds remain … concealed beneath a patina of conviviality', p. 35) and the great colonial magnate Pedro Romero to the great California magnate Howard Hughes. There is, finally, a clever periodic self-deflation through tactical shifts into chattiness. The Lacandon Maya were, it seems, 'an affable bunch' (p. 275), their far-off rulers possessed by the 'God-given duty to clobber lowland provincials into submission' (p. 3). This is historical writing as, among other things, high entertainment.

Just as the style occupies something of a crossroads, so too does the story, very much one of the circum-Caribbean. There is a fine and significant irony in that a saga of obstreperous locals should have so many foreign characters, outsiders among outsiders, in its cast. When the great filibuster ruler Francisco Sentmanat falls it is a fellow Cuban who kills him (and boils his head in oil); the governor of Chiapas a couple of years later is another Cuban. The strongman who succeeds Sentmanat, Miguel Bruno Dazo, is a Colombian whose Italian father fought for Napoleon in the French army. The US consul is 'the polymath Transylvanian, Count Félix de Nemegyei' (p. 261). The mahogany barons are (almost) all foreign. One in three

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022216X17001286 Published online by Cambridge University Press