

Women in Postrevolutionary Mexico: The Emergence of a New Feminist Political History

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Dealing with the aftermath of the Mexican Revolution (1910–1940), Jocelyn Olcott's monograph offers an innovative contribution to a sophisticated, multigenerational literature that explores the dynamics and impact of the Western Hemisphere's most violent revolution. This review essay will place this monograph and a related edited collection into the context of two scholarly debates in Mexican history while drawing out some broader suggestions about its relevance to the future of feminist political history elsewhere in Latin America.

POSTREVOLUTIONARY STATE FORMATION AND THE CHALLENGE OF CARDENISMO

To understand the contribution of *Revolutionary Women*, it is necessary to grasp the historiographical self-critique that characterized the history of Mexico in the early 1990s. Scholars had long grappled with the question of how to understand the revolution; in particular, how and why did it give rise to Latin America's most stable political system from 1917 to 2000, a regime marked by both authoritarianism and high levels of popular mobilization? By the late 1980s, scholars had exhaustively explored the military phase of the revolution (1910–17), and many Mexicanists turned with renewed energy to postrevolutionary state formation.

In 1994, Oxford Mexicanist Alan Knight placed the administration of President Lázaro Cárdenas (1934–40) at the center of debate with a widely influential article titled "Cardenismo: Juggernaut or Jalopy?" As the most radical president in the Western Hemisphere in the 1930s, Cárdenas carried out a massive distribution of land to peasants, nationalized foreign oil interests, and fostered the development of powerful agrarian and trade union movements. The problem, retrospectively, lay in the

longterm outcome of the Cárdenas era: the consolidation of a durable and undemocratic system of machine politics and state tutelage over Mexican society. This led Knight to formulate an ambitious research agenda that asked, among other things, how radical was Cardenismo in its goals and policies versus practical accomplishments? Was it authoritarian or democratic? Was policy conceived on high and dictated to those below, or was it “being determined by either popular (‘bottom-up’) or provincial (‘periphery-in’) pressures?” And if so, how? (Knight 1994, 73).

The year 1994 also saw the publication of a widely influential volume, co-edited by Gilbert M. Joseph and Daniel Nugent, titled *Everyday Forms of State Formation: Revolution and the Negotiation of Rule in Modern Mexico*. To escape old traps, the editors suggested, scholars needed new ways to conceive of sociopolitical change during the postrevolutionary period. In particular, they called for less focus on who ruled and more on how rule was accomplished. Moreover, the editors and contributors argued that an “expanded conception of the political” might help better to integrate “views of the Mexican Revolution from below with a more compelling and nuanced view from above.” Dubbing this “everyday forms of state formation,” the volume also highlighted the political centrality of “the cultural dimension of historical process and social experience,” the importance of which had hitherto often been downplayed (Joseph and Nugent 1994, xvii, 12).

For those who took up the challenge of finding the political in quotidian interactions, it quickly became clear that it was “impossible to interpret the revolution and the postrevolutionary society it spawned without a clear understanding of the nature, meaning, and impact of Cardenismo” (Bantjes 1998, xi). The “paradoxical combination of popular mobilization and lack of a competitive, multiparty system” after Cárdenas, Bantjes and Fallaw both argued, could be understood only by “exploring the multivocality of Cardenismo,” how different groups understood it, and how it operated at a practical, everyday level (Fallaw 2001, 1; Bantjes 1998, xiv).

As Olcott embarked on her doctoral research in the mid-1990s, she boldly took up the challenge offered by Knight, Joseph, and Nugent. But her angle of approach contrasted sharply with even the new scholarship, which continued the field’s singular emphasis on peasant and worker mobilization. Instead, she chose a very different object of study: secular women’s movements, allied with the regime, which were multi-class in nature and ideologically diverse in character. In doing so, Olcott’s research both complemented and diverged from another important 1994 edited collection, *Women of the Mexican Countryside, 1850–1990* (Fowler-Salamini and Vaughan 1994). This volume introduced gender to the study of peasant women in Mexico. Although limited to the rural subaltern, the editors’ introduction did identify the lacu-

nae that would be taken up by Olcott and others: did “women’s presence in formerly all-male political arenas alter gender behavior, perception, roles, and identity for both men and women”? What was the impact of the “urban-based, middle-class professional women’s movement”? What strategies and linkages were needed for women’s “entry into the decisionmaking process” (Fowler-Salamini and Vaughan 1994, xxii, xx)? Unlike that volume’s contributors, however, Olcott did not privilege worker and peasant mobilization over the female activism that surrounded the fight for women’s suffrage or reforms of the civil code.

Olcott thereby built on a tradition of women’s history while participating in the incipient gender history that was developing in Latin American historiography, in many cases out of the historiography of rural and urban labor. If the subject of women in the Anglophone literature on Latin America was first taken up between 1978 and 1986, the field initially developed more quickly for the colonial period. Serious explorations of the modern era began only in the 1980s, followed by an “impressive outpouring of scholarship” in the 1990s (French and Bliss 2007, 4; Chambers 2003). As part of this 1990s boom, Latin Americanist scholars produced a series of works that took seriously the category of gender, discussing the power relationships implicitly and explicitly produced through the deployment of masculinity and femininity (Stern 1995; Lavrín 1995; Besse 1996; French and James 1997; Klubock 1998). Following the lead of Mexicanist Mary Kay Vaughn (1997), Olcott’s 2000 Yale dissertation self-consciously took up these methodological and theoretical challenges and set out to analyze the implications of gendered citizenship for the development of the revolutionary state.

MEXICAN WOMEN’S HISTORY AND SUFFRAGE: BROADENING THE FRAME

While women’s history in the United States had focused since the 1970s on suffrage and feminism, the same was not true in the historiography on Mexico. If suffrage and feminist movements were lacunae, the same was not true of the devout women of all social classes who identified with the Catholic Church’s harsh and violent struggle after 1917 with a secular revolutionary regime. Women figured prominently in the Cristero War of 1926–29, which cost 70,000 to 85,000 lives (Meyer 1976), as well as in the resistance to the “socialist education” propagated by the Cárdenas government. Indeed, the study of conservative Catholic women is an established subspecialty in Mexican women’s history (Gotschall 1970; Miller 1984; Schell 2003; Boylan 2000; O’Dogherty 1991; Fernández-Aceves 1996). Therefore, female activism in Mexico was just as likely to be identified with piety, anti-“bolshevism” (i.e., Cárdenas), and the defense of traditional gender roles. This common sense is so prevalent

that a major historian in 2006 would casually claim that “the revolutionary ruling class postponed women’s right to vote for thirty years” because of their church loyalties and religious fervor (Meyer 2006, 288).

Yet the world of secular Mexican women actually was marked by political effervescence in the 1930s, and even the near-achievement of women’s suffrage in 1938. This episode of female activism under Cárdenas was addressed at the time by only one scholar, a U.S. feminist (Fisher 1942). The eventual granting of women’s suffrage in 1953 did produce a pioneering U.S. study a decade later (Morton 1962), but not much followed, and feminist or women’s movements remained absent from the scholarly agenda. Indeed, it took 20 years before the publication of a synthetic survey, again in the United States, while the first Mexican monograph on suffrage appeared only in 1992 (Macías 1982; Tuñón Pablos 1992).

These studies were as weak in their research base as they were bold in generalizing about the “national” (their geographic scope was restricted to the capital). Their primary value lay in calling attention to the existence of feminist and women’s movements that were, as late as 1995, “unknown” in the vast scholarship on how Cardenismo laid the groundwork for modern Mexico (Ramos-Escandón 1995, 123; Tuñón 2002, 14). Describing the challenges ahead in 1995, a leading Mexican historian noted that “the political history of women” under Cárdenas remained to be written, while advancing the hypothesis that a “female political subject” had actually emerged by that time (Cano 1995, 73–74).

In its arguments, *Revolutionary Women in Postrevolutionary Mexico* marks a decisive transition in the overall trajectory of Mexican women’s history since the 1970s. As part of contemporary second-wave feminism, early Mexican women’s history was driven to premature synthesis by the imperative of including women in a new national “herstory.” Denunciation was often combined with cheerleading for “foremothers,” while feminist movements were treated as self-evidently important, with far less attention to why or in what way. The governing research question was “whether or not the Mexican Revolution was a ‘revolution for women’” (Bliss 2001, 7), and the conclusion, from which Olcott dissents, was that “The Mexican Revolution was No Revolution for Women” (title of a 1973 article by Macías; reprinted in Macías 1982, ix). As late as 2001, the revolution was judged “a ‘patriarchal event’ that largely consolidated male authority at all social levels,” a proposition routinely justified by referring to its failure to enfranchise women (Bliss 2001, 7–8; Deutsch 1991; Fowler-Salamini and Vaughn 1994, xxi; Porter 2003).

How does Olcott go beyond this inherited framing of the issues? And in what regard does her work contribute, and how boldly, to reconfiguring the significance of the mobilization of women and the suffrage fight during high Cardenismo? It must first be observed that *Revolutionary Women* contrasts quite sharply with other monographs on the same

subject. The first Mexican book studied a leftist “united front” women’s movement (FUDPM) that briefly flourished for a few years in the mid-1930s under Communist Party leadership (Tuñón Pablos 1992). Researched primarily in newspapers, this preliminary study of a single organizational episode treated the larger political dynamics of Cardenismo as a given. Olcott’s book not only offers a richer treatment of the FUDPM but covers a far broader array of secular movements involving women of all origins, as they were drawn into activism by the radicalization of postrevolutionary politics in the 1920s and 1930s. Unlike the work of Tuñón Pablos, *Revolutionary Women* is not “strictly about women” and does encompass “men’s reactions to women’s organization” (a criticism in Spenser and Levinson 1999, 242–43).

Two years after Olcott’s dissertation, Enriqueta Tuñón wrote a book on women’s suffrage from the inauguration of Cárdenas through 1953. Like Morton’s 1962 volume, the focus is narrowed to women’s suffrage alone, and the author criticizes those who would swamp the issue “within the interior of larger political processes.” Tuñón is primarily interested in identifying the errors that led to the defeat of suffrage, as if success would have been achieved if only women had pursued a more autonomous policy distant from both the Communists and the ruling party (Tuñón 2002, 15, 10, 51). This restricted focus and spirit of *parti pris* produces an analytical foreshortening compared to Olcott’s careful unraveling of the “conundrum of why Mexico’s dynamic and mobilized women’s movement ultimately failed to secure the most basic liberal right of voting” (Olcott 2005, 160). In answering this question, Olcott draws on feminist political theory as it has moved away from the ahistorical models of overarching and timeless patriarchy.

Indeed, Olcott’s monograph is a decisive contribution to the new gendered political history of the state advocated by two leading feminist social scientists, Elizabeth Dore and Maxine Molyneux. Growing out of a 1996 conference, their 2000 collection praises the literature on state formation in the region for providing a “wealth of insights into the complex relationships that exist between states and societies.” While noting that “less attention has been devoted to the ways in which state formation itself is a gendered process,” they are even more emphatic in their insistence that a gendered understanding of state formation must deal not only with “continuities over time but . . . [with] moments . . . of transition from one state form to another.” In particular, Molyneux cites the case of Mexico under Cárdenas as an example of “one of several modernizing nationalist states that in the 1920s and 1930s adopted policies designed to erode the traditional gender order and to free women from patriarchal absolutism.” Given the centrality of the state to feminist politics, “how did state formation condition gender, and how did gender affect state formation in Latin America?” (Dore and Molyneux 2000, viii, 50–51, x).

It is here that Olcott advances an innovative suggestion about how we might broaden and redefine the complex of issues referenced as “women’s suffrage” or Mexican “feminism” in the 1930s. Our understanding of “secular women activists’ frustrated bids for citizenship,” she suggests, is transformed when viewed as part of a larger discussion of models of citizenship. In particular, she boldly introduces the concept of a “contingent, inhabited, and gendered” model of revolutionary, not liberal, citizenship as it unfolded in a society characterized by “rapidly destabilizing gender ideologies.” Thus, suffrage in Mexico—whose importance she recognizes as a condensation of issues at play—must be understood as a “small slice—and a relatively unimportant one—of the ways in which people live citizenship.” Overall, she suggests, we must move beyond a conceptualization that sees the relation between “women” and “politics” as “two solid objects colliding.” They are better understood as “a complex interplay producing new possibilities, and further troubling the categories of ‘women’ and ‘politics.’” Following Joseph and Nugent, she suggests that scholars should keep their eyes focused on gendered politics as it is manifested, performed, and practiced in everyday lives and struggles (Olcott 2005, 4–7).

In her monograph, Olcott illustrates the utility of this broad conceptualization in “specific historical and political contexts” by examining how the practice of citizenship is decisively shaped by “local and regional characteristics as well as national and transnational ones” (Olcott 2005, 4–7). Meticulously and exhaustively researched, the book beautifully balances the story of national politics at the highest level with three regional studies that illuminate the diversity of meanings and outcomes that coexisted under Cárdenas’s rhetorical umbrella as he pursued the centralization of power in the national state. This alternation between national perspectives and regional and local case studies allows Olcott to weave seamlessly between levels of explanation on a complicated and unstable political terrain.

In its sophistication, the research design underlying *Revolutionary Women* goes beyond established practice in the study of Cardenismo, wherein regional studies have loomed large. Those younger scholars who took up the challenge of Cardenismo in the 1990s still tended to execute national-regional studies on the basis of a single state (Bantjes 1998; Fallaw 2001) or even city (Fernández-Aceves 1996; Schell 2003). Although illuminating, the choice of a given state virtually dictates the resulting generalizations, given the wide differences across Mexican national space. Even a senior scholar’s ambitious and rightfully prize-winning study of women and peasants under Cárdenas still works with a comparison of four localities in two states (Vaughan 1997). Only Olcott’s monograph approximates the national, through its coverage of events in the country’s capital and in three states located in distinct

Mexican regions. Her choices for case studies, one might add, can be justified based on the existence of distinct patterns of “Church influence since the Conquest, particularly during the twentieth century” (see the regional scheme offered by Reich 1995, 76–77).

In paying close attention to state and local configurations of power and politics, Olcott’s book generates broader conclusions about the differing dynamics of mobilization that characterized how activist women and their followers came to inhabit and define citizenship in postrevolutionary Mexico. In 1920s Michoacán, women organizers focused on anticlerical and temperance activities and also worked closely with state-level political networks. By contrast, organizing in the Comarca Lagunera, site of an epic agrarian reform struggle, was characterized by participatory and labor-centered identities, operating within patronage networks that were nationally, not locally, oriented. In Mexico City, women activists focused disproportionately on the fight for suffrage, while the Yucatán, backward and politically fragmented, produced a remarkable and entirely *sui generis* style of local feminist organizing that evolved from the first national feminist congress, held there in 1916.

In 2003, a senior scholar of Latin American gender history, Sarah Chambers, predicted that the field would see many more dichotomies being challenged in the coming years. Olcott’s book is a compelling example of this iconoclastic drive for durable causal explanations. “The women’s suffrage debate,” as Olcott notes, “set in relief many of the contradictions and conflicts surrounding citizenship more broadly as ordinary Mexicans navigated between collective, identity-based and liberal, individualist conceptions, both adulterated by a patronage-based political culture.” For all Mexicans after Cárdenas, formal markers of liberal citizenship faded in importance because, Olcott insists, they had “little bearing on the contingent, inhabited, and gendered ways in which they practiced revolutionary citizenship” (Olcott 2005, 200). While the urban suffrage movement created leverage for women’s organizations, forcing political leaders to consider how to secure women’s allegiance, most women—even activist women—practiced revolutionary citizenship far from the voting booth. Secular women were not apathetic about political rights or ignorant of suffrage efforts, but for them the benefits of revolution were defined practically. In their insistence on this, women transgressed “both codified and customary boundaries to claim their revolutionary entitlements” (Olcott 2005, 200).

THE EMERGENCE OF A TRANSNATIONAL COMMUNITY OF FEMINIST HISTORIANS OF GENDER IN MEXICO

The volume *Sex in Revolution*, co-edited by Olcott and two senior historians, provides a useful point of entry into the ever more deeply inter-

twined network of scholarship “concerned with understanding the history of gender and the Mexican Revolution” (French and Bliss 2007, 3). Indeed, *Sex in Revolution* is one of two English-language edited volumes that originated in an international research conference organized by Olcott at Yale in May 2001. The meeting brought together six Mexican and four British scholars with a large number of junior and senior scholars of women and gender from the United States (Mitchell and Schell 2007). This was followed by three subsequent binational and multinational meetings in September 2003 (Universidad de Guadalajara), September 2005 (University of Utah), and March 2007 (El Colegio de Michoacán). What has emerged from this multigenerational network is a new model of transnational cooperation, reciprocity, and mutual recognition across difference (the fifth colloquium is scheduled for autumn 2009).

The booming state of this dynamic, binational field of historical inquiry can also be seen from the appearance in 2006 not only of *Sex in Revolution* but of a second edited collection, published in Mexico (Fernández-Aceves et al. 2006). Reflecting the increasingly transnational nature of this enterprise, the English language and the Spanish language volumes both include editors from the other country (all the more remarkable given past histories of nationalist tension). This international opening is even more important because the discipline of history in Mexico was late and “timid” in taking up the question of women and gender (Ramos-Escandón 1995, 114). Moreover, even today, those Mexican scholars engaged with the subject are restricted to a “small academic ghetto,” isolated from “mainstream historical approaches” in Mexico (Fernández-Aceves 2007, 200–202).

Judging from these two volumes, Olcott has decisively advanced the field in terms of substantive argument while setting new standards of theoretical sophistication, methodological accomplishment, and programmatic advancement. Most important, her conceptual approach holds promise for those in other disciplines, including political science. In particular, she offers useful suggestions for how to broaden discussion about what has been identified as the puzzling continued neglect of the topic in the study of Mexican politics (Rodríguez 1998, 2, 15). Her book, furthermore, directly addresses three of the “four interrelated themes” identified by the editors of a 2001 collection on Latin American women and politics: “the extent of women’s autonomy from political parties,” “the possibilities for coalition building,” and “how and why women justify their political actions” (González and Kampwirth 2001, 11). Where a new feminist political history will take us may still be unclear, but it has much to contribute to our understanding of politics and citizenship in its broadest sense, in both the past and the present.

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