

Taylor (p. 259) notes that given the multiple complementarities across the political and economic domains, changes to political institutions are needed that can enhance the likelihood of strategic and effective economic policy. Until then, the incentives toward parochialism, oligopolistic firm structures and the continued use of the developmentalist toolkit are likely to continue to drag down any attempt to achieve a more satisfying economic take-off. Lastly, the book brings important theoretical and empirical contributions to not only those studying Brazil but, more broadly, those interested in the political economy of non-Western countries and the possibilities of reforms that would overcome long-standing hurdles to economic (and democratic) progress.

doi:10.1017/S0022216X23000512

## **Germán Vergara, *Fueling Mexico: Energy and Environment, 1850–1950***

**Cambridge University Press, 2021, pp. xii + 322**

Henrique Gasperin

Geneva Graduate Institute

As the ongoing climate crisis spearheads global concerns, energy comes to the fore both as a potential solution and a means to explain how we have got to the present situation. Germán Vergara's insightful and well-documented *Fueling Mexico* showcases how the energy transition to fossil fuels has unfolded in Mexico, paying special attention to the intricate, co-constitutive relationship between energy regimes and human agency, as well as changing social behaviour. The book is chronologically structured, and is based on a central understanding of energy as flow – a solidly explored notion that knits together its five chapters and serves as the main conceptual grounding for Vergara's energy-centred timeline. Guided by this perspective, the author sheds light on critical historical junctures and events that are not often pointed out in mainstream accounts of Mexico's history, but that prove central to understanding the country's path towards fossil-fuel dependency. As much as his work complexifies a global history of fossil-fuel energy transition, it also evinces particularities of the Mexican case that challenge unidirectional narratives of changing energetic regimes – often reliant on cases restricted to the Global North.

Vergara relies on a fine-grained analysis of qualitative and quantitative data to structure his multicausal approach to change over time, emphasising both technical aspects, comparing energy systems and cultural practices. An important aspect of his vast selection of sources is that many of them are not national compilations. Instead, Vergara largely relies on regional data, which stretch from published primary sources to local quantitative assessments made by companies and local public

statistics. By cross-reading distinct information under energy-centred metrics, the author highlights regional singularities, and compares the different realities that shaped the Mexican territory. This comes in particularly handy when presenting the pre-fossil-fuel energetical context of the mid-nineteenth century, from which the narrative departs. Vergara vividly exposes the limitations of a society largely dependent on muscle power, with a territory almost devoid of reliable waterways (both for navigation and energy generation), and poor transportation networks – striking constraints for industrial development.

The arrival of steam engines in the mid-nineteenth century, mostly used in mining and textile industries, combined with the booming expansion of railroad networks from the 1880s to the early twentieth century, mark a central historical juncture of Vergara's energy-centred chronology. Concerned with the formation of 'great tree-poor archipelagoes' (p. 84) led by the rising pressure for fuelwood, industrialists and government officials would push for alternative sources of energy. Drawing from newspapers, journals and official cables, Vergara shows how woodlands were celebrated for their intrinsic benefits for national development, rather than their sublime nature, which sustained the need for rational management and fuel substitution. With an environmental-energetic bottleneck ahead, coal was favoured as the primary alternative, engaging national agencies in widespread prospecting action, and marking the beginning of Mexico's transition to a fossil-fuel-dependent energy system.

Alongside Chapters 3 and 4, Vergara emphasises the fundamental parallels of this energetic transition with politics of nation-building and territorial integration. The author acknowledges the relatively discrete quantitative importance of coal in Mexican energy generation when compared to North Atlantic countries, which is mostly attributed to its shallow reserves and the destructive impact of the 1910s revolution on its infrastructure. Nevertheless, supported by a qualitative reading, Vergara narrates the Mexican history of coal use between the 1880s and 1910s as the linchpin for expectations and desires shared among political and economic elites – one that established a post-revolutionary consensus over the indisputable centrality of fossil fuels in the country's path towards industrialisation. His take on the rise and eventual centrality of oil in Mexico is inward-looking and nonlinear, emphasising regional particularities, and overlaps across energetic sources. The construction of pipeline networks, rising electrification, and the emergence of motorised vehicles are narrated as paramount events for Mexico's consolidation as an oiled-power nation from the early 1920s onwards.

If the previous chapters of the book emphasise the role of industries and manufacturing plants at the forefront of the energy transition, Vergara's fifth chapter pictures what oil-fuelled Mexican society looked like in the mid-twentieth century. Acute urbanisation, modern 'Green Revolution' agriculture, and new consumption habits are presented as both causes and consequences of Mexico's new regime, which had 75 per cent of its gross energy consumption based on fossil fuels in 1955. Vergara also highlights major controversies brought about by the regime: on the one hand, it made Mexico's so-called 'economic miracle' possible, while reducing pressure on forests used for fuelwood; on the other hand, it pushed for massive waves of land displacement, rising urban precariousness, waning local food autonomy, acute air pollution, and tropical woodland deforestation.

Navigating these contradictions, Vergara's multicausal approach to Mexican history successfully illustrates the various extents to which 'fossil energy underwrote the country's successes as well as its failures' (p. 220).

Vergara's book solidly fulfils its mission of narrating an energy-centred history of Mexico. His fine-grained archival research and multidisciplinary grounding convincingly sustain the importance of emphasising historical junctures that are often overlooked by traditional historiography of Mexico. The book also provides crucial insights by demonstrating how the Mexican state's legitimacy over its territory has been erected via the structuring of a colossal infrastructure of extraction, processing and transportation of oil, metaphorically presented as the country's 'lifeblood' (p. 177). Moreover, the book offers a substantial contribution to the fields of environmental history and energy humanities as it evinces ways the energetic transition both shaped and was shaped by social and environmental local realities, without losing sight of situating Mexico's case within global histories of energy use and production. Regarding its limitations, Vergara's book largely neglects histories of potential alternatives to what he names the 'paradox of perennial scarcity' (p. 3) – privileging a narrative about the establishment of a fossil-fuel energy consensus. More insights into disputes for alternative national (or subnational) energetic futures would have enriched the complexity of the book's multicausal and multi-agential approach, and strengthened its stance against potential criticisms of path-dependent teleology.

doi:10.1017/S0022216X23000524

## **Sarah Foss, *On Our Own Terms: Development and Indigeneity in Cold War Guatemala***

**University of North Carolina Press, 2022, pp. xvi + 316**

Nicholas Copeland

Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University

Creatively researched and thoughtfully written and analysed, *On Our Own Terms* is a welcome contribution to the historiography of the Cold War in Guatemala, illuminating *indigenista* development policies during the Revolution (1944–54) and highlighting Indigenous agency in relation to changing forms of counter-insurgency development. Sarah Foss pursues a 'holistic analysis of the lived experiences of development' (p. 7) in Indigenous communities through archival research and oral histories with programme officers and surviving recipients to revisit well-known cases and explore less-examined programmes. A core concern is the intersection of development and race, specifically how development programmes were shaped by broader and narrower conceptions of acceptable indigeneity, or the 'permitted Indian'.