

POST-AUTHORITARIAN POLITICS IN MEXICO:

Beyond 2000, Elections, and the Formal Political Arena

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MEXICO'S MANDARINS: CRAFTING A POWER ELITE FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY. By Roderic Ai Camp. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002. Pp. 308. \$21.95 paper.)

THE ROMANCE OF DEMOCRACY: COMPLIANT DEFIANCE IN CONTEMPORARY MEXICO. By Matthew C. Gutmann. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002. Pp. 289. \$49.95 cloth, \$19.95 paper.)

BUILDING THE FOURTH ESTATE: DEMOCRATIZATION AND THE RISE OF A FREE PRESS IN MEXICO. By Chappell Lawson. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002. Pp. 287. \$50.00 cloth, \$19.95 paper.)

WOMEN IN CONTEMPORARY MEXICAN POLITICS. By Victoria E. Rodríguez. (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2003. Pp. 322. \$50.00 cloth, \$22.95 paper.)

The central focus of scholarship on Mexican politics since 1980 has been the increasing competitiveness of elections, and, to a lesser degree, the corresponding decline of presidential power, transformation of political parties, and rise of regionalism and a more combative congress (Camp 2000, 412; 2003a, 431; 2003b, 195). The loss of the long-ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) in the 2000 presidential election certainly marks a watershed in the electoral arena and government. The opportunity to institutionalize democratic governmental relations, as, for example, with the implementation of a law guaranteeing public access to federal government information in 2003, is an important consequence of the alternation of presidential power.

Yet while the election of an opposition party candidate to the presidency may further alter the holdover culture and structures of Mexico's particular brand of authoritarian politics, it certainly has not transformed them. The authoritarian legacies of the PRI regime continue to set the broad institutional parameters within which a more democratic

Mexican political system must take root. Nor does the alternation of presidential power in 2000 ensure that the practice of democracy in Mexico will move beyond what Middlebrook refers to as “partyocracy,” or rule by parties without the substantial participation of civil society or citizens (2001, 41), especially given voter alienation in the 2003 congressional elections and the temptation to seek votes through television ads alone (Moreno 2003; Trejo 2001; Villamil 2001, 55–65). Given Mexico’s political traditions and the universalistic shortcomings of electoral democracy, we should diversify the focus of scholarship to assess the multiplicity of actors, who in their totality, determine the breadth of political representation and governmental accountability.

The works reviewed here help us begin to fulfill this task. All are in-depth, book-length studies that are the result of years of scholarly inquiry, and all add texture to work on Mexican politics by U.S. authors. Specifically, they assess a “power elite” across five institutional spheres that influences government policy and political culture; women in political parties, government, and NGOs on the national and state level; changes in the little-explored practices and political effects of the news media; and the ebb and flow of popular urban residents’ participation in politics. The authors use a variety of methodologies and theoretical lenses, but all offer lessons about the prospects for broader representation and accountability in post-authoritarian Mexico. I address these lessons at the end of the essay. First, I review each work, discussing its research objectives, methods, some of its findings or arguments, and the broader questions it provokes.

THE POWER ELITE

The capstone of three decades of work on Mexican elites, *Mexico’s Mandarins: Crafting a Power Elite for the Twenty-First Century* traces Roderic Ai Camp’s own research journey from the study of the elite in intellectual life, business, politics, the military, and the church (1985, 1989, 1993, 1995, 1997). For the first time, however, he compares recruitment, sources of socialization and values, and cohesion across the five elite spheres. He also provides comparisons to elites in other national settings. In doing so, Camp can address a series of questions. Who has access to decision-making in post-authoritarian Mexico? How do they attain their power? And importantly, how penetrable, cohesive, and homogenous is the Mexican power elite? The broader question that drives this book is whether Mexican democracy, or any democracy, can be broadly representative and responsive if such a group exists.

The elite come from five groups: politicians, intellectuals, clergy, military officers, and capitalists. Camp selected the groups based on their control of either material or cultural resources, as well as their

“contributions to the transformation of Mexican society” (17). With the exception of the military, the cases were culled from interviews and biographical information on the complete universe of leaders in each of the categories.¹ In all, 398 elites are reviewed. Camp justifies his focus on elites because they have “greater opportunity and ability to influence the kind of regime a country will have” (4). This is especially true in weak institutional settings, he writes. In Mexico, the presidency and the executive bureaucracy have overpowered other areas of government, the private sector, and the media—at least until recent times.

Mexico does not have a power elite in the sense of people who play influential roles within more than one social sector. Less than 2 percent of the elites reviewed in the study fit such a definition. Elites in various fields are connected informally, however. Thus, Mexico does have a power elite when defined as people with direct, *informal access* to elites across societal realms, or as Camp writes, “a small set of people who are the individual actors within that power structure, who also share direct, informal access to other elite actors” (13).

The theoretical objective of the book is to question U.S. approaches that link elites only in organizational settings. For example, Camp argues that studying only interlocking corporate boards either misses linkages when kinship or education closely tie directors, or erroneously lead to the assumption that contacts were first made on the boards. Each of the elite groups under study has its own peculiarities, but Camp found similarities as well. Power elite membership across groups is most determined by having a mentor—usually a relative or teacher—who was himself a member of the power elite in the same sphere of influence. Mentors not only recruit protégés, but determine their educational paths. Post-graduate education abroad was a broadly present characteristic, helping to explain the socialization of certain values. Education abroad also spawned crucial changes in those values across generations, from support for the market economy to the progressive influences of Vatican II.

As for the power elite’s influence on political decision making and mass culture, Camp suggests that power elite influence on the latter may be more important than the former. His analysis of the Mexican Council of Businessmen, made up of Mexico’s richest capitalists, suggests that the organization did not use its access to top politicians to lobby for group privileges. Instead, members used access to secure later meetings to ask for individual favors. One might ask, however, whether such atomized petitions led simply to individual instances of crony

1. Camp has biographical information on 380 of an estimated 470 top officers in the Mexican military. Precise numbers are kept secret (7).

capitalism, or to favors that as a whole changed the course of specific policies and eventually did further group interests.

Camp found that members of the power elite form friendships across elite categories but do not necessarily pursue uniform goals, especially on issues of national importance. Through their writing and public statements, intellectuals such as the clergy in the pulpit and in pastoral letters promoted political liberalization and criticized neoliberal economic programs. Meanwhile, capitalists and technocratic politicians were less supportive of democratization. In the case of technocrats, they preferred to forestall democratic change. Instead, capitalists and technocrats concentrated on transforming the state-directed economy.

WOMEN IN POLITICS

Camp notes that his detailed analysis essentially considers only powerful men. His samples reflect the male-dominated reality of the Mexican power structure, he writes. Victoria Rodríguez laments overall the lack of research on Mexican women in politics. Her initial library research, in fact, discovered no book-length works on female Mexican politicians at all. Rodríguez's *Women in Contemporary Mexican Politics*, as well as her earlier compendium *Women's Participation in Mexican Political Life* (1998), begins to remedy that omission.

Women in Contemporary Mexican Politics is the culmination of more than six years of research by the author and her graduate students at The University of Texas at Austin. It has practical as well as theoretical urgency, the author argues. The number of Mexican women holding political office is rising, and women populate and lead most of the country's locally focused NGOs and social movements. At the household level, women strongly influence the political direction and intensity of family members' political participation. And finally, Rodríguez cites polling data to ask whether the lack of attention to gender differences in political surveys is the result of a lack of a statistically significant "gender gap," or rather an insensitivity to the topic.

Like Camp, Rodríguez's research provokes broader doubts about the representative nature and responsiveness of Mexican democracy. She writes:

Time and again we see references to the fact that it is difficult to label a country as democratic if half of the population—i.e., women—is in effect excluded from formal political participation. The exclusion of marginalized groups makes the state less responsive to the needs of its citizens, especially if a group—such as women—has special interests and needs. If the state structure remains largely monopolized by men, it is unlikely that state policies will emerge that are gender-fair or favorable to women. (21–22)

Rodríguez's use of in-depth interviews is similar to *Mexico's Mandarins*, but she supplements interviews with direct observation of

politicians at home and work. Rodríguez's interviews include more than eighty governmental and non-governmental leaders, including women in political offices and parties, female leaders of influential NGOs and feminist organizations, and, at first blush contradictorily, the wives of male politicians. The contradiction diminishes when the author discusses the power some of these women assert over social policy. The women interviewed came from Mexico City and four states in distinct regions of the country (8).

The author grounds her work in theories of democracy and democratic transition, but given the lack of research on women in Mexican politics, her objectives are largely exploratory. Drawing from a wider literature on women and politics, little-seen data from the Mexican government, and her own interviews and direct observation, Rodríguez addresses five basic questions. First, how and why do women become involved and active politically? Second, why are there so few women in political office? Third, in what ways does the number of women in political office make a difference? Fourth, what can be done to improve women's representation in government? And fifth, what can women expect from a more democratic state? (11).

Rodríguez attributes the mobilization of women in the realm of informal politics to long-term demographic shifts and more abrupt changes that resulted from the economic crises since 1982. A Mexican style "politics of the personal" ensued as women joined social movements and NGOs for collective survival, and feminist NGOs shifted their agendas from abstract politicization to needs-based orientation. Rodríguez argues that women participate in popular movements and NGOs to pursue two very different types of goals. These include the "practical" objectives associated with survival in the face of antagonistic government policies, as well as the "strategic interests" of promoting legislative and cultural defenses against multiple forms of gendered repression (48).

Participation in NGOs and social movements helped women and children survive under harsh economic conditions, but produced few substantive gains. Mexican women as a group continue to earn two-thirds of what men earn, face discrimination from authorities, and even eat lower-quality foods. Rodríguez notes: "At the beginning of the twenty-first century, women and children continue to be the poorest, least educated people in Mexico" (58).

The growth of women's participation in informal politics has not been accompanied by similar progress in political parties, public office, or public policy. Rodríguez lauds rising numbers of women in Congress while criticizing remaining disparities. Though double the level of 1980, only 16 percent of the seats in the lower house were held by women in 2000. With a few exceptions, women legislators "are largely

relegated to less-influential positions" (145). Only three women have ever governed states, and women currently lead only 3.3 percent of municipalities.

In addition to the "triple" workday of home, office, and activism, Rodríguez posits the absence of mentors as a strong deterrent to recruitment and promotion of female politicians given the importance of mentors for men. Perhaps most important, Rodríguez explores the role of political parties as gatekeepers for women in politics and public office. Most of the women in the study criticize their own political parties for discouraging women as candidates, despite the enactment of quotas of female candidates in the PRI and the left-leaning Democratic Revolution Party (PRD). These criticisms were launched even when the PRI and PRD had women as party presidents; party leaders said gender-based solidarity took a back seat when leading the party.

Female politicians were instrumental in the PRI's decision to implement candidate quotas in 1997, but they remain far from pleased with the results. For example, both of the parties essentially complied with the 30 percent candidate quotas in the 2000 election, but Rodríguez found that most women candidates were placed in difficult districts or were listed as substitutes for male candidates (117). Even in the PRD, which established quotas for female candidates six years before the PRI, party discourse outpaces action. Only the Federal District Government has made a concerted effort to appoint women to public office.

Unlike the PRD and PRI, the Partido Acción Nacional (PAN) openly rejects quotas. The conservatives' discourse is contradictory, however, Rodríguez notes. On the one hand, pushed by women and progressive leaders in the late 1990s, the PAN promoted more women within the party structure. On the other hand, PAN documents and male politicians continue to emphasize women's duty to "the critical role of creating life." *Panista* women usually prized motherhood over political involvement, yet believed women should enter politics "because women enrich Mexican politics with the dignity they bring" (119).

Recent statements from officials in *panista* President Vicente Fox's cabinet suggest the progressive wing of the party is losing ground. Most notable were statements written by Labor Secretary Carlos Abascal, which told women to give themselves "fully to the profession of mother." These statements, delivered on Woman's Day 2001, outraged *Panista* women politicians, but party loyalty prevented them from supporting a congressional reprimand of the secretary.

The devotion to partisanship has limited the success of gender-based legislation, with a few important exceptions. Women legislators across party lines pushed through increases in the penalties for rape and domestic abuse and outlawed workplace pregnancy exams and firing pregnant employees. Despite these successes, Rodríguez concludes that

women politicians have not taken advantage of Mexico's "transitional moment," when political institutions are most open to change. She cites Craske's comments on all of Latin America (1999, 87):

It appears that the consolidation of democratic rule is "normalization", which in effect means the return of male-dominated political parties and gendered politics, and mass de-politicization of social movements with particular implications for women: in short, a remasculinization of politics. (246)

Unlike most democratization researchers, Rodríguez explores the importance of media representations. As in other societies, women politicians in Mexico felt they had to endure gratuitous comments about their appearance much more than men, although a few carved out space for a personal style that enhanced their public support. The politicians also complained that newspapers wrested seriousness from women politicians and gender issues by referring to women by their first names in headlines ("Marta" Sahagún de Fox remains the favorite) and relegating gender issues to back pages or "culture" sections. However, the women said coverage was improving, perhaps as more women scale the hierarchies of Mexican newsrooms.² The politicians were more critical of the sexist depictions of women in *telenovelas*, but even there growing realism has changed women's roles in an important minority of soap operas.

MEDIA "OPENING"

The Mexican media's move toward more diverse coverage of women, the church, and other social actors over the last twenty years has not been as profound as the shift in reporting on formal political actors (Hughes 2001, 2003). The changes in coverage of elections, parties, and government have been enormous and begs greater analysis. The need mirrors a broader trend. Until very recently, democratization research neglected the influences of the mass media on political transitions (O'Neil 1998; Lawson 2002, 2–3). Such neglect is surprising given the recognition by theorists and policy experts that assertive, diverse, and independent political information is crucial to the functioning of citizenship, good government, and democratic politics (World Bank 2002). The media can stimulate democratic politics by providing diverse electoral information; publicizing ineptitude and malfeasance in government; and legitimizing participation in elections, party politics, and

2. My own content analysis of Mexico City newspaper front pages in 2000 found that gender issues essentially were ignored, while women politicians were featured prominently when they occupied powerful formal positions in government or parties (Hughes 2001).

NGOs. To support political participation and accountability, however, journalists must be free from governmental control and evoke a civic calling rather than respond strictly to instrumental rewards or a hyper-commercial news logic (Epstein 1973; McChesney 2000; Hughes 2001, 2003; Hughes and Lawson 2004).

Chappell Lawson's book *Building the Fourth Estate* explains the opening of Mexico's news media in the last two decades and assesses the political effects of "media opening" on elections, scandals, and the mobilization of civil society. As such, he engages crucial questions for both policy and theory. Focusing on news media and press freedom from government control, Lawson defines media opening as a process "by which the mass media become more representative of societal viewpoints and more independent of official control" (3). Through interviews and content analysis, he addresses two main questions: How do "free" media develop, and what role do politically independent news media play in promoting transitions?

To answer these questions, Lawson first traces the development of Mexico's traditional media system. Print, radio, and television news legitimized the old regime by allowing the government to set the public agenda, remaining silent on sensitive issues and biasing news in favor of the ruling party (5). He then analyzes the breakdown of the old system of media controls, highlighting the role of commercial competition and journalistic norms. He especially notes the role of increased commercial competition in broadcasting as the privatization of a second television network, TV Azteca, introduced market mechanisms into news decisions at the longtime commercial monopoly Televisa.

Lawson's overall argument is that greater media assertiveness and diversity were not the mechanistic result of political liberalization. Instead, political liberalization interacted with journalistic norms and market-based economic reforms. "Specifically, when media outlets are forced to compete for audiences and journalists have already developed their own professional standards, even modest liberalization of the political environment can trigger rapid and thorough transformation of reporting" (6). However, he also warns about what has become one of the most troubling trends in news media across Mexico and the region, journalists' subservience to the market and to the particular interests of private sector media owners, particularly in television, where professional journalistic norms are less developed. This trend deserves further exploration.³

3. See also Sallie Hughes and Chappell Lawson, "Propaganda and Crony Capitalism. Partisan Bias in Mexican Television News," 2004.

Several Mexican and a few U.S. authors have analyzed the development of the Mexican media in recent years (Guerrero 2002; Trejo 2001; Hayes 2000; Hughes 2001). However, the last part of Lawson's book provides a unique contribution both to Mexican political studies and media studies generally by offering one of the few rigorous analyses of varying types of media effects during political transitions. Lawson analyzes the role of two independent publications—*La Jornada* newspaper and *Proceso* newsmagazine—in the rebirth of Mexican civil society in the late 1980s, specifically tracing how the publications created a new, legitimizing public discourse about the work of these groups. He then analyzes how assertive and critical press coverage, sometimes repeated in television newscasts, generated political scandals that helped delegitimize the PRI regime. Finally, he uses quantitative analysis of a panel of voters during the 1997 congressional elections to show how greater balance in television news coverage had a significant effect on voters' candidate choices. Of press scandals, he concludes:

During the 1990s, independent newspapers, radio shows and television programs began to cover topics that were previously off-limits: drug trafficking, official corruption, electoral fraud, and government-sponsored repression. The result was a series of devastating political scandals that exposed the darker side of authoritarian rule. Recurring scandals in turn undermined support for existing institutions, generated pressure for reform, altered elite calculations, and generally drove forward the process of political transition. (155)

The broader implication of Lawson's work is that news media play important roles in fomenting—or stifling—broader representation and greater political accountability. Yet, as in the United States, even a structurally "free" press can be cowed by government news managers, journalistic norms that privilege official sources, and markets that homogenize, sanitize, or sensationalize news coverage (Bennett 1990; 2003). This book is an important contribution to a relatively new field of media analysis in Mexico and Latin America. The field deserves greater development in the social sciences.

THE RESIDENTS OF HUEHUETZIN STREET

Matthew Guttman's book *The Romance of Democracy* turns an ethnographer's eye to political beliefs and behaviors in a poor Mexico City neighborhood. Guttman rejects the proposition that the poor fight oppression through "hidden" forms of resistance, showering the romanticism of the post-socialist, academic left with a bucket of pessimistic realism.

Here my focus is to describe and understand the political perceptions and participation of *los de abajo*, those social underdogs who are compliant in the face of

social controls seemingly beyond their ability to resist, and who at the same time remain defiantly enraged at having to accept this very situation. (6)

Those who followed Mexico in the 1990s noted the ups and downs of enthusiasm for electoral politics. Guttman's research aim is to describe this periodic passion for politics, as well as to explain why fervor diminished almost as suddenly as it arose (xvii). In doing so, he offers lessons about the connected yet contradicting notions of "agency" and "civil impotence" (19). Engagement and acquiescence are intertwined in Guttman's definition of "the romance of democracy," or the possibility for popular political participation with the wooing of Mexicans "to believe in utopian promises when their only political future is more of the same" (xxv). In other words, the "romance of democracy" is the possibility of democratic participation with no corresponding improvement of living conditions.

The information Gutmann culls from interviews and participant observation as a part-time resident of the Colonia Santo Domingo between 1991 and 2000 documents the views of Guttman's neighbors in the *colonia*, a workingclass neighborhood in Mexico City founded by land invaders in the early 1970s. He analyzes these beliefs during several of the critical, historical junctures mentioned by each of the authors under review. Critical junctures are events that "for those old enough to have social memories marked turning points in their personal and historical lives" (9).

Through personal conversations, Gutmann traces the understandings, interpretations, and influences of the 1968 student movement and massacre in Tlatelolco, which ended the political legitimacy of the PRI regime for the residents of Huehuetzin Street. Analyzing reactions to neoliberalism in the chapter "For whom the Taco Bells Toll," Santo Domingo residents describe their understanding of the dismantling of state-led capitalism and social welfare protections as the end of the PRI system's economic legitimacy. Moreover, the age of neoliberalism prompted Guttman's friends and neighbors to view themselves, the poor, as the sole defenders of Mexican sovereignty. In the view of these citizens, technocratic politicians and rich capitalists, had sold out Mexico for personal gain.

Despite negative media portrayals, most *colonia* residents supported the 1999 student strike against tuition charges that closed the National University (UNAM) for most of that year. Santo Domingo residents believed that the students were protecting one of the victories of the Mexican Revolution, though they personally could not take advantage of free instruction. Similarly, Gutmann describes the early 1999 visit of members of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) as remarkable. More than one year later, residents still debated the "diverse forms of struggle" the Zapatistas embodied—armed, electoral,

non-governmental, and pacifist (156). The dialogue the Zapatistas opened about how to attain social change was not lost on these working-class Mexicans once they communicated personally with the rebels, rather than relying on media coverage.

After the roller coaster ride of the 1990s, the victory of a conservative party presidential candidate in the 2000 elections provoked neither great sadness nor joy. It was as if the residents of Huehuetzin Street wanted to protect themselves from greater disappointment. Like the other authors reviewed in this essay, Gutmann hammers home the lesson that much work is still necessary to make democracy relevant to the majority of Mexicans.

In marked contrast to the jubilant perspective offered by the news media in the wake of the July 2 presidential election, in Santo Domingo reactions to the election of the PAN candidate were more muted. In the *colonia* the election did not usher in a wave of optimistic expectations about the possibility, much less the probability, of positive social change under the aegis of PAN leadership. Far more palpable was the sentiment that political passivity was the surest route to not being disappointed. The lower one's political expectations were, the less traumatic the result of political events like the election would be. (207)

CONCLUSIONS

The four books reviewed here broaden our knowledge of Mexican politics. They show how a multiplicity of actors outside of the formal political elite and the mass electorate changed over the last third of the twentieth century, contributing to the arrival of more democratic politics. Yet each work also raises questions about the prospects for consolidation of a system of broad representation and deep accountability. Camp's work dispels the notion of a formally overlapping, cohesive and collusive power elite, but provokes doubts about the penetrability and representative nature of the highest levels of decision making in the country. The passkey into the Mexican power elite is a mentor who is already a member of the power elite. Usually, this mentor comes from an elite educational institution or is a member of the future elite's own extended family. Moreover, the informal overlaps between power elites in politics, business, religion, intellectual life, and the military are plentiful. Access to multiple spheres of information and decision making surely benefit those who are already in the club, as well as their protégés.

Rodríguez's analysis of the increasing power of women in politics also documents the inadequacies of their advancement. More women are in Congress than twenty years ago, but the numbers remain small and most women are posted to inconsequential committees. Moreover, women politicians place partisan loyalties above fostering a women's legislative

agenda. The number of women governing cities and states is minuscule. Two of the three political parties now have minimum quotas of female candidates but place them in the positions least likely to gain office. The position of the third party, the conservative PAN, is highly contradictory. Women's participation in NGOs and social movements helped women and children survive the economic crises of the 1980s and 1990s, but they remain the poorest and least-educated members of Mexican society. The Mexican political system largely excludes at least half of its population.

Like the study of women in politics, rigorous scholarship on the media in Mexican politics is rare. Lawson's analysis of broadcast and print media shows that news media played important roles during Mexico's political transition, propelling change by delegitimizing the PRI regime, encouraging participation in civil society and promoting informed voter decisions. In short, Lawson documents how and why more assertive news media wrested away the government's control over mediated information, which had helped to isolate citizens and perpetuate authoritarian politics for decades. Yet the tendency for posttransition, market-driven television news to trivialize politics and the more tentative transformation of print news coverage outside of elections and government makes one question the democratizing role of the news media during the current reinstitutionalization of Mexican politics.

Gutmann, meanwhile, sheds light on the variability of civic participation among the urban working class. The promise of democracy for the popular majority is great, he finds; so can be the deception when little changes. Unlike those of us who wondered whether deception at partisan gridlock and economic stagnation explained historically low participation rates during the 2003 Congressional elections, the first without the PRI in presidential office, Gutmann shows that popular disillusion with elections started before 2003 in what was supposed to be a celebratory time for Mexican democracy.

Whether democracy remains irrelevant for many Mexicans is an issue that touches directly on advantaged access to elite decision making and cultural resources, whether women and other marginalized groups receive equal political representation, and how the owners of the media choose to produce the news. We understand each of these research areas better thanks to these scholars. Each issue deserves continued scrutiny.

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