GENDER, THE WORKING CLASS, AND THE HISTORY OF THE POST–REVOLUTIONARY STATE IN MEXICO

Introduction

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The articles in this special issue by María Teresa Fernández-Aceves, Heather Fowler-Salamini, Susan Gauss, and Jocelyn Olcott reflect a new interest in feminist analysis of gender among Latin American labor historians trained in the United States. Together they prompt a reconsideration of the history of the working class, the labor movement, and the corporatist system of state-directed labor relations in twentieth-century Mexico. In addition, while Mexico's historical trajectory has largely been viewed as distinct in Latin America owing to the 1910–1917 revolution and near century-long rule of the official party of the revolution, the focus on gender suggests important commonalities among Latin American countries that experienced significant levels of industrialization during the twentieth century, especially Argentina, Brazil, and Chile. The essays also underline the ways in which the processes of state formation and industrial modernization in post–1930 Latin America bear a striking resemblance to the establishment of welfare states and corporatist labor arrangements in advanced industrial economies in the United States and Europe. The use of feminist analysis to examine the histories of working-class and state formation, the labor process, and capital accumulation during a period of industrial modernization reveals broader histories of class and gender that are international and cannot be understood solely within national histories and historiographies.

The infamous 1968 massacre of student protesters in Mexico City, later endorsed by the Confederación de Trabajadores Mexicanos (Federation of Mexican Workers, CTM), marked a turning point in both Mexican history and the historiography of the Mexican Revolution. A revisionist school that emphasized the authoritarian and capitalist character of the post-revolutionary state replaced the interpretation of the revolution as the first social revolution of the twentieth century or, in the words of anthropologist Eric Wolf, a "peasant war."[1] In the revisionist literature, workers, like peasants, were quickly assimilated into a model that viewed popular groups, organized in centralized federations by economic sector, as the largely passive pillars of a centralized corporatist regime. Perhaps the defining moment for historians of Mexican labor was the organization of urban workers who belonged to the anarcho-syndicalist Casa del Obrero

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Mundial in "Red Battalions." The Battalions fought with the Constitutionalist armies against the peasant revolutionaries of Emiliano Zapata in 1915–1916 in exchange for a Constitutionalist commitment to support labor reform, including broad rights for unions; these rights were later enshrined in the 1917 constitution, one of the first and most progressive labor codes in the Americas. This pact between labor and the eventually victorious Constitutionalists, led by elites from Mexico's northern provinces, has been viewed as shaping the relationship between organized labor and the state throughout the twentieth century.

The repercussions for labor history were that, until the 1980s, the history of the Mexican working class and the revolution remained largely unexplored. As with much of the Latin American labor historiography, historians identified the working class with labor institutions, (male) leaders, and ideologies or drew on social-scientific models of populism that stressed organized labor's subordination to the state.[2] Women workers and gender were absent from histories of both labor politics and class formation and production. A recent post-revisionist historiographical turn, influenced by both social history and the "new" cultural history, has reexamined the local and regional process of everyday forms of post–revolutionary state formation in terms of the role of subalterns (mostly peasants) in contesting state authority and shaping the political pacts that defined the hegemonic project of the ruling party, the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (Institutional Revolutionary Party, PRI) or its earlier incarnation, the Partido Nacional Revolucionario (National Revolutionary Party, PNR), during much of the twentieth century.[3] This has coincided with a boom in Latin American labor history that has introduced concerns with class formation, the labor process, Taylorism, and working-class experience, consciousness, and culture.

In the Latin American historiography, this turn to the kind of working-class history inspired by E. P. Thompson, David Montgomery, and Herbert Gutman has integrated a social–historical approach with a focus on the state and politics. Historians have written brilliant studies of Vargas in Brazil, Peronism in Argentina, and Allende's socialist revolution in Chile from the perspective of the factory floor, often drawing on extensive use of oral history both to compensate for limited archival infrastructure and to gain access to the realm of working-class experience and culture.[4] These studies demonstrate that industrial workers, far from constituting a passive and manipulated mass that threw its weight behind authoritarian and populist politicians like Perón and Vargas, drew on longstanding labor traditions and built their own project that helped to shape the course of populist politics and the everyday functioning of corporatist labor systems. Studies by John Lear and William French on Mexico City workers and northern miners, respectively, have applied the insights of this new labor historiography to a rethinking of the relationship between workers, the labor movement, and the Mexican revolution.[5] Lear, for example, illustrates the ways in which an autonomous tradition of urban working-class protest in Mexico City shaped the corporatist project of the northern elites who came to power in 1917 and gave organized labor a central role in post–revolutionary politics.

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This turn to the shop floor has also given rise to a more recent literature on workers and gender. These labor histories have employed an analysis of women workers and gender ideology without completely following the linguistic turn initiated by Joan Wallach Scott's well known essays on "gender as a category of historical analysis." Recent histories have sought to show that structural and material historical processes—class and state formation, capital accumulation, and workers' struggles over production, which were the major concern of the first wave of revisionist labor histories—cannot be understood fully without examining the histories of women workers and gender ideologies.[6]

Yet, the many recent works on labor in Latin America that have taken the gender turn have not constituted a historiographical rupture. As the articles in this volume demonstrate, labor historians have maintained both a structural focus and an interest in experience and culture, while they have explored the central significance of gender in the histories of working classes.

The articles in this volume reflect these trends in the historical literature on both the post–revolutionary Mexican state and the Latin American working class. By focusing on gender and the experiences of women workers they provide new insights into the pacts that defined the relationship between labor and the PRI during the twentieth century. The authors examine the role of gender ideologies in working-class formation, the labor movement, and the nationalist state-building project of the PNR/PRI in regions as disparate as the northern city of Guadalajara in the state of Jalisco, the southern state of Puebla, the gulf state of Veracruz, and the capital, Mexico City, and in industries as different as textiles, garment, tortillas, and coffee.[7] They demonstrate the importance of women workers in regional labor movements and in key industries and show that working-class formation was shaped by sexual divisions of labor that defined certain kinds of work to be appropriate to women. In all four industries and regions, the labor process was segregated and organized around gendered ideas about labor and skill, and women's wage-work possibilities were restricted to feminized sectors of the labor market, with the support of male workers, the labor movement, and the state. The authors also underline that rationalization of the labor process and industrial modernization were gendered processes. As in Chile, Brazil, Argentina, and Colombia, the mechanization of production and the rationalization of the labor process during post–1920 industrialization tended to expel women from the labor force after the employment of women workers as an inexpensive labor force during a period of industrial "takeoff" in the first decades of the century, mostly in textile manufacturing.

The traditional account of labor and the state in post–revolutionary Mexico holds that until the 1950s cycles of worker militancy alternated with cycles in which new pacts were organized, cementing organized labor's loyalty to the official revolutionary party. During the formative period of this relationship, roughly from 1920 to 1952, workers won basic legal rights and state support for unionization as well as a significant measure of power inside factories (for example, control over hiring and firing) in exchange for loyalty to the PNR/PRI. In addition, labor joined the state in the shared goal of promoting industrializa-

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tion. The unions would help to enforce labor discipline in exchange for representation on the shop floor and the promise of jobs and decent wages to be created by state-sponsored import substitution industrialization.[8] The articles in this volume show that the taming of independent and militant regional labor movements and their subordination to the state and national federations was a gendered process that produced the exclusion of women workers from the labor market and the labor movement. Struggles between labor, capital, and the state over production and modernization were shaped by ideologies of gender increasingly associated with the Victorian ideal of middle-class female domesticity.

To an unusual degree, when compared with other Latin American industrial economies, in Mexico the labor movement operated both to enforce labor discipline and work rules and to exercise control of hiring and firing. Industry-wide contracts gave established unions the closed shop, while also ensuring work discipline and workers' subordination to the state. As an instrument of the state, the labor movement imposed gender norms and ideologies in the name of protecting the jobs and wages of male workers. The labor movement's role as a partner of the state in a nationalist modernizing industrial project was predicated on ideologies that defined industrial labor as masculine and consigned women to the domestic sphere or feminized sectors of the labor market. Although labor's institutional strength and political clout and capital's relative weakness were unusual within Mexico, an alliance of male industrial workers, employers, and the state in the name of industrial growth also underpinned moments of populist politics and the establishment of corporatist labor systems in Argentina, Brazil, and Chile. Labor leaders joined state officials in a gendered pact rooted in the guarantee of jobs and a "family wage" to male industrial workers and the associated control male workers gained over women's labor and sexuality within the domestic sphere. Of course, this arrangement also characterized the advanced industrial nations and welfare states of the North Atlantic economy, as feminist historians have demonstrated.

Olcott and Gauss show that unions in the textile industry used their control of hiring and firing to guarantee a masculine labor force. Unions played a major role in promoting ideas about hygiene, the training of women for domestic roles and motherhood, and protectionist labor legislation that led to women's exclusion from certain segments of the labor market. Gauss demonstrates that the PRI and the labor movement built their legitimacy by responding to, appropriating, and mobilizing working-class masculine culture. Labor solidarity and the support of male workers for the corporatist compromise were produced through the production of masculine work and union cultures and a shared commitment to the gender ideology of female domesticity. The ruling party built an alliance with organized labor and male factory workers based on an exclusion of women from the labor force and the imposition of the gender ideology of female domesticity and the science of motherhood, promoted enthusiastically by organized labor. Similarly, Fernández-Aceves argues that male workers and labor leaders opposed women's labor in Guadalajara mills because they saw it as eroding their control of women's social-sexual behavior and undermining women's

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traditional domestic roles. Olcott traces the change in gender ideology of the Cardenista government from a progressive focus on the rights of women workers in 1936 to a conservative ideology of the family wage in 1938, which guaranteed a masculine monopoly of industrial wage labor to combat unemployment and low industrial wages.

In addition to unraveling the tangled threads of gender ideology and class and state formation, the articles draw on earlier forms of women's history and social history to examine the ways in which women workers actively confronted the rationalization of production, gender-segregated labor processes, and centralizing labor movements. Fernández-Aceves, for example, discusses the ways in which both men and women mobilized gendered concepts of work to oppose the mechanization of tortilla production; women opposed mechanization in the mills by drawing on their traditional gender identities and ideas about appropriately female work skills. Fernández-Aceves also shows that following mechanization women workers developed a more militant response by asserting their own rights as workers, critiquing the male-dominated unions, organizing their own unions, and establishing alliances with feminist organizations. They challenged the gendered division of labor by asserting their rights to labor in mills as well as in dough and tortilla production.

The articles by Fernández-Aceves and Fowler-Salamini use life histories and oral testimony, a methodology pioneered by the revisionist labor historians, to demonstrate the ways in which working women built new kinds of work cultures and forms of urban working-class sociability. Fernández-Aceves argues that, following the mechanization of tortilla production in Guadalajara, new forms of urban popular culture in markets, churches, and neighborhoods provided women new possibilities for entering public space. She shows that women workers' new patterns of sociability established the basis for their militant union activism and links to middle-class feminist organizations. Similarly, Fowler-Salamini argues that women workers took pride in their work, viewed labor in Veracruz coffee plants as a career and means of social mobility, and built a vibrant working-class culture based on friendships, new social networks, new forms of courtship with men in the city's streets, dance halls, and union halls. Workplace and street cultures gave meaning to women's work and shaped the contours of a female worker identity. Both Fowler-Salamini and Fernández-Aceves provide a rich portrait of women workers who had long-term careers in mill labor and belonged to two or three generations of women workers. In addition, they show that women workers viewed wage labor not just as temporary or supplementary, but as liberation from domestic drudgery and a source of pride. These articles explore the ways in which working women found pride in work and built a robust class identity based on friendships and social ties built in urban public spaces, mills, and plants. Working women's understanding of work and class did not conform to the ideology of female domesticity championed by many male workers, labor federations, and the state. The use of oral history in these articles reinserts women workers into a broader narrative of gender ideology, industrialization, and labor policy and politics. Oral history moves

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the focus of these labor histories from ideology and institutions to the material realities of everyday life: the realm of sociability and experience where working women built their sense of what it meant to be working-class.

Consistent with recent trends in Mexican historiography, the articles also highlight regionalism and local political struggles in the formation of the post–revolutionary state.[9] Working women's factory and street cultures provided the basis for moments of militant independent organizing and alliances with feminist organizations at the local and regional level. The authors move away from the common portrayal of a centralized state and labor movement ruthlessly demobilizing and co-opting local unions into an overarching corporatist system. The articles describe local and regional labor traditions and conflicts, often mediated by radical state-level political movements and unions, by focusing on Puebla, Guadalajara, Veracruz, and the Federal District. They demonstrate that local labor movements were more militant than the national federations and provided venues for women workers' labor activism and participation at different historical moments. Fernández-Aceves shows that, during the late 1920s in Guadalajara, the populist Confederación de Agrupaciones Obreras Libertarias de Jalisco (CAOLJ) and then the more radical Confederación Obrera de Jalisco (COJ), in alliance with the Communist Party, defied the centralizing Confederación Regional Obrera Mexicana (CROM) and counteracted conservative Catholic social organizations. For a moment in 1931, these unions provided women with independent channels of representation and bases for building alliances with middle-class feminists and the Círculo Feminista del Occidente (COF). In the same vein, Olcott demonstrates that, in the early days of the Popular Front circa 1936, competition with the Mexican Communist party on the Left and the Catholic Church on the Right, as well as the influence of an active feminist movement, led the Cárdenas government to adopt a progressive policy on the rights of women workers in order to win women's political support. Gauss examines the ways in which the Federación Regional de Obreros y Campesinos del Estado de Puebla (FROC) in Puebla opposed governor Avila Camacho's political machine, as well as the CTM and CROM, and led a number of militant strikes between 1946 and 1948, while organizing militant women workers who were concentrated in *bonetería* (knitwear).

In sum, the articles published here do much to rewrite the history of the post–revolutionary state and labor movement in Mexico. In giving us a sense of women workers' struggles during a period of state-sponsored industrialization the articles provide a sense of the everyday politics of production during the consolidation of the one-party rule of the PRI. In addition, by focusing on both women workers and gender ideology they direct our attention to the ways in which the notorious pacts undergirding the corporatist hegemony of the PRI were built around gender ideologies shared by male workers, labor unions, and the state. As in other Latin American countries experiencing import substitution industrialization, women's increasing exclusion from industrial wage labor between 1920 and 1952 constituted a part of a general partnership between male workers, unions, and the state in the name of producing industrial growth, high-

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er wages, and lower (male) unemployment. In this process, modernization and modernity came to be defined in terms of the trained female housewife rather than the woman worker enjoying basic legal rights and protections, as during the brief populist interregnum under the government of Lázaro Cárdenas. In Mexico, as in other countries in and outside Latin America, the ideology of the family wage won the support, to varying degrees depending on the country, of male workers, unions, industrial employers, and state labor officials.

The articles do not, however, view the exclusion of women from the industrial workforce and the subordination of labor to the state as inevitable processes. The essays show that, at different historical moments and in different places, the PRI's hegemonic project was contested and, in some cases, shaped by militant regional labor movements, which often included women workers. The progressive moment in which the Labor Department under Cárdenas worked to guarantee legal rights for women workers was the result of the activities of both regional labor unions and feminist organizations. Working women developed their own ideas about the value of wage work, established networks and patterns of sociability that allowed them to occupy public space, and sought to build labor organizations that would represent their interests as both women and workers, at times in conflict with male workers, the national labor federations, and the state.

Beginning with the Border Industrialization Program of 1965 and accelerating after the 1982 economic crisis and the implementation of NAFTA in 1994, economic (under)development in Mexico took a new course, away from state-protected import substitution industrialization to the formation of foreign-owned, export-oriented industries (*maquilas*), which assembled parts manufactured elsewhere in the global production line. While women workers had seen their workforce participation dwindle during the preceding decades, as the articles in this volume demonstrate, once again during the 1980s and 1990s a new model for industrial growth turned to inexpensive female labor and women workers returned to garment and textile production as well as to jobs in high tech electronics plants, now located in factories largely along the Mexico–US border. The lack of labor rights in these plants is notorious, as is the complicity of the CROM and the CTM in defeating workers' efforts to build independent unions in the foreign-owned runaway shops. The articles in this volume go a long way toward explaining organized labor's historical role as an agent of the PRI and its hostility to women workers and their attempts to unionize by exposing the central role of gender ideologies in the politics of production and the labor movement. However, by casting women workers as protagonists of Mexican labor history the articles also recover traditions of organizing and resistance that might provide a sign of hope in this era in which the PRI has finally been dethroned and independent unions are making some headway in the *maquilas* on Mexico's borderlands. Together these articles show that, without the turn to a feminist analysis of gender, our understanding of working-class formation, labor politics, industrialization, and the establishment of the post–revolutionary state during the 1930s and 1940s in Mexico would remain incomplete.

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NOTES

1. A classic revisionist interpretation of the Mexican Revolution is John Womack Jr., "The Mexican Revolution, 1910–1920," *The Cambridge History of Latin America,* ed. Leslie Bethell (Cambridge, 1986). In this essay, Womack distanced himself from his earlier magisterial history of Zapata's peasant revolution, which tended to share the views of earlier historians who viewed the military struggles between 1910 and 1920 as constituting the first social revolution of the twentieth century. See John Womack Jr., *Zapata and the Mexican Revolution* (New York, 1970) and Frank Tannenbaum, *Peace by Revolution: Mexico after 1910* (New York, 1966).

2. For a useful summary of the labor historiography until the mid-1980s, see Alan Knight, "The Working Class and the Mexican Revolution, c. 1900–1920," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 16 (1984): 51–79.

3. See the path-breaking collection of essays edited by Gilbert Joseph and Daniel Nugent, *Everyday Forms of State Formation: Revolution and the Negotiation of Rule in Modern Mexico* (Durham, NC, 1994). Interestingly, despite the volume's focus on the everyday, the articles deal neither with urban or industrial workers nor gender and women.

4. Peter Winn, *Weavers of Revolution: The Yarur Workers and Chile's Road to Socialism* (Oxford, 1986), Daniel James, *Resistance and Integration: Peronism and the Argentine Working Class, 1946–1976* (Cambridge, 1988), John D. French, *The Brazilian Workers' ABC: Class Conflict and Alliances in Modern Sao Paulo* (Chapel Hill, 1992).

5. William E. French, *A Peaceful and Working People: Manners, Morals, and Class Formation in Northern Mexico* (Albuquerque, 1996); John Lear, *Workers Neighbors, and Citizens: The Revolution in Mexico City* (Lincoln, 2001).

6. See Emilia Viotti da Costa, "Experience versus Structures: New Tendencies in the History of Labor and the Working Class in Latin America—What Do We Gain? What Do We Lose?" *International Labor and Working-Class History* 36 (Fall 1989): 3–24.

7. For recent labor histories that include an analytical concern with gender, as well as class, see Elizabeth Quay Hutchison, *Labors Appropriate to their Sex: Gender, Labor, and Politics in Urban Chile, 1900–1930* (Durham, 2001), Heidi Tinsman, *Partners in Conflict: The Politics of Gender, Sexuality, and Labor in the Chilean Agrarian Reform, 1950–1973* (Durham, 2002); Thomas Miller Klubock, *Contested Communities: Class, Gender, and Politics in Chile's El Teniente Cooper Mine, 1904–1951* (Durham, 1998); Daniel James, *Doña María's Story: Life History, Memory, and Political Identity* (Durham, 2001); Ann Farnsworth-Alvear, *Dulcinea in the Factory: Myths, Morals, Men, and Women in Colombia's Industrial Experiment, 1905–1960* (Durham, 2000); Barbara Weinstein, *For Social Peace in Brazil: Industrialists and the Remaking of the Working Class in Sao Paulo, 1920–1964* (Chapel Hill, 1997); Karin Alejandra Rosemblatt, *Gendered Compromises: Political Cultures and the State in Chile, 1920–1950* (Chapel Hill, 2000); John French and Daniel James, *The Gendered Worlds of Latin American Women Workers: From Household and Factory to the Union Hall and Ballot Box* (Durham, 1997); Deborah Levenson-Estrada, *Trade Unionists Against Terror* (Chapel Hill, 1994).

8. See Ruth Berins Collier and David Collier, *Shaping the Political Arena: Critical Junctures, the Labor Movement, and Regime Dynamics in Latin America* (Princeton, 1991) and Kevin Middlebrook, *The Paradox of Revolution: Labor, the State, and Authoritarianism in Mexico* (Baltimore, 1995).

9. See, for example, Alan Knight, *The Mexican Revolution,* 2 volumes (Lincoln, 1986).

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