

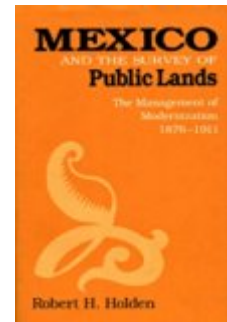
# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Robert H. Holden. *Mexico and the Survey of Public Lands: The Management of Modernization, 1876-1911*. DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1994. 235 pp. \$30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-87580-181-0.

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My professors and many members of my own generation of teachers, reiterate many cliches in the classroom about Mexican history, that are based on flimsy research. Every epoch on which we teach is replete with assertions that have snowballed into tautologies, not because they are anchored by evidence, but because they are incessantly postulated. Such is the state of Mexican historiography then, that revisionist-prone researchers can find a virtual treasure trove of fragile theories and challengeable conclusions. When I was a graduate student, for example, Enrique Semo, Charles Brading and others were making mince meat out of Francois Chevalier's theories on haciendas and Woodrow Borah's "century of depression."

Correcting misconstrued historical judgments based on symbols and anti-symbols that are the foundation for Mexico's contemporary nationalism, encounter resistance, however. The most hallowed historical canons have as heroes, Hidalgo, Juarez, the Revolution and Cardenas. The villains are Iturbide, Santa Ana, Huerta and "the mother of all demons," the Porfiriato. What makes such fare so virulent is that practically all Mexicans are of like mind on these issues. Unlike the trend in this country, it has never been hip for Mexicans intellectuals—whether from the left or right—to iconoclastically tear down historical sacred cows. Thus the radical revisionism that has taken to task America's most sacred patriotic symbols in the last few years, has not been paralleled by historians of Mexico.

Nonetheless, in the course of the last twenty years or so the image of such Mexican "rouges" as Iturbide and Huerta have been sanitized. Recently the Porfiriato, owing to changing political conditions in Mexico, has un-

dergone corrective surgery as well. Permission has been granted, so it seems, to break from official and accepted interpretation and review this period with new perspective.

In this book, Robert Holden does just that. He examines one of the most nurtured and notorious of the Porfiriato symbols of evil—the Terreno Baldio Acts. Certainly, if a top ten list of *Porfiriato foibles* were to be listed, this legislation would be at the top. Historians have held acts responsible for land usurpation by a few land developers which caused extreme hardship to peasants and Indians, for creating pent-up resentment which found a release in rebellion, and for forcing thousands of peasants to migrate to the United States.

But this is not true according to Holden's radically new interpretation. As he puts it, "This caricature has long been a tempting target of historical research, but the lack of ready access to the Archivo de Terrenos Nacionales and the frequency with which the legend is still repeated by present-day historians have allowed to linger beyond its lifetime" (p. 128). The author does not deny that property manipulation which benefited elites took place during the Porfiriato. But it was not the Baldio Acts, with its requirements that Mexicans hold legal title to property and the agency assigned to enforce the law that was responsible. Indeed as has long been asserted, the Secretaria de Fomento which carried on the survey by hiring private contractors, paid for services by giving the companies one third of all the land found vacant. But the agency was scrupulous in upholding the rights of all those who could prove land ownership and in many cases sided with *los de abajo*. Holden comes to this conclusion after scrutinizing the records for selected states

which were affected the most by land surveyors. He provides more anecdotal rather than quantitative evidence to prove his point, however. He acknowledges that Mexican functionaries in Fomento could have covered up nefarious activities but finds that to be unlikely. The main reason for his doubts is that peasants were much more able to defend themselves in court than what they have been credited for. This discouraged chicanery because “The companies recognized that respecting the claims of property holders was often cheaper than engaging in litigation or administrative process that could delay the issue of a legal title for years” (p. 130).

The danger with this revisionist trend, is that before you can say, *Porfirio Diaz*, the bandwagon will be so alluring to researchers that a scourge of evidence manipulation will uplift that which is not deserving of being uplifted. This book does not do that but we should prepare ourselves for an avalanche.

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