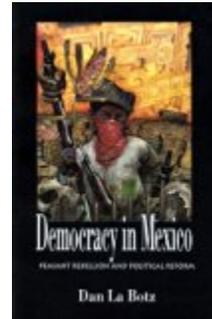


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Dan La Botz. *Democracy in Mexico: Peasant Rebellion and Political Reform*. Boston, Mass.: South End Press, 1995. xvi + 274 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-89608-508-4; \$17.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-89608-507-7.

Reviewed by Doug Friedman (College of Charleston )  
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## A Long Road for Democratization in Mexico

This compact volume by Dan La Botz, a writer on labor issues and graduate student living in Mexico City, is an excellent discussion of recent efforts at democratization in Mexico as well as a sober look at its prospects. La Botz is remarkably comprehensive in his discussion given the length of the work, and his writing is clear and free of jargon, making this an excellent choice for undergraduate (as well as graduate) classes in Latin American politics and/or comparative democratization.

From this view perhaps the only fault of the work is that it is so explicitly one-sided. This is a view of the trials and tribulations of Mexican democratization from the Left. The other side, though discussed (particularly the PAN-National Action Party), is given short shrift. Although this is not necessarily bad, it does make the work somewhat less useful as a text.

One can find very little fault with the thesis of the work (except that it is buried in the last two chapters)—that the forces necessary to bring democracy to Mexico are presently just not there; that the various movements currently active—including Cuauhtemoc Cardenas' PRD—are either too weak or too easily coopted by the PRI (Institutional Revolutionary Party) or even too politically naive about the PRI to win power. Without the ideological weight and numbers a mass workers' movement can provide, La Botz contends, Mexican democratization is at a standstill.

However, La Botz mistakenly attempts a comparison with the democracy movements in Eastern and Central

Europe that obfuscates more than it enlightens us about the nature of the democracy movement in Mexico. More important, he fails to place the political movement and its prospects in the same international context he gives the economic reforms he believes have brought Mexico to the brink of disaster. It is this failure to take into account the international dimension that I think leads to La Botz's mistakenly relying upon the Mexican workers' movement for Mexico's democratization.

La Botz begins his narrative with an excellent review of the origins of the Zapatista rebellion that unfolded in Chiapas on New Years Day, 1994. The focus on peasant rebellion in Mexico and on its role historically takes such a central place in his story that one begins to suspect that the subtitle of the work, "Peasant Rebellion and Political Reform," might have been a more apt main title. This is not the case, for La Botz expands the focus of the work outward to include all of the contemporary progressive forces that have in one way or another contributed to the cause of political reform in Mexico. Reform in Mexico in this case specifically means the effort to dislodge the PRI from power.

La Botz surveys what he calls the rise of "civil society" (a very questionable concept employed extensively to explain and describe the pro-democracy opposition movements that arose in some countries of Eastern and Central Europe during the crisis of state socialism in the 1980s), in which he includes a rather eclectic collection of groups ranging from citizen organized self-help

groups that arose in Mexico City in the wake of the 1985 earthquake to anti-nuclear groups, women's groups, citizen groups organized to support the Zapatista rebels, as well as what only can be described as a bourgeois coffee klatch.

La Botz follows the recent electoral efforts to dislodge the PRI. He recounts the familiar story of the 1988 election stolen from the PRD (Party of the Democratic Revolution) as well as the more recent 1994 election, which was stolen more by co-optation than fraud. He convincingly shows how the PRI successfully transformed itself in the 1980s, culminating in the complete takeover by neo-liberal oriented technocrats with the election of Carlos Salinas in 1988. Salinas devoted the next six years to the complete transformation of the Mexican economy, Mexican bourgeoisie, and base of the PRI itself. The Mexican economy was fully opened to foreign—chiefly U.S.—investment, privatized into thousands of state firms, and firmly embedded into the “new world order.”

La Botz shows how important the change in the PRI was for its electoral success in 1994, but he does not try to give what has happened in Mexico a global perspective. The economic and political changes that he describes in Mexico are not isolated developments. They are replicated in some form or other almost everywhere in Latin America, in the Third World, and in many developed countries. This world capitalist transformation that has had profound effects on Mexico will not, it seems, as La Botz suggests, be substantially challenged by a revived Mexican workers' movement—whether allied with “civil society” or not.

My disagreements with La Botz' conclusions notwithstanding, this is a very valuable book, which I intend to work into my courses.

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