



Tore C. Olsson. *Agrarian Crossings: Reformers and the Remaking of the US and Mexican Countryside.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017. 296 pp. \$35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-691-16520-2.

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In recent years, historians have revised the notion that the New Deal was a largely endogenous, self-contained set of policies. Yet most of this revisionist work has focused its gaze on European influences, overlooking the critical role that Latin America played in inspiring New Dealers. Nowhere was this inspiration more evident than in the racially divided agrarian South. There, New Dealers looked to the revival of the Mexican Revolution of 1910-20 under Lázaro Cárdenas in the 1930s for useful lessons on how to reform unequal land tenure. Tore C. Olsson's *Agrarian Crossings* is the first book-length study of this process. Engagingly and elegantly written, it furnishes a new interpretation of, and approach to, both the agrarian New Deal and Cardenismo—and more broadly, the history of US-Mexican relations.

As Olsson makes clear, “this book is not a comparative history but rather a history of comparisons, a study of interactions and exchanges” (p. 4). To this end, through six chapters and an epilogue, Olsson compares US southern agrarian populists with Zapatistas (as emblematic of Mexican *agraristas* nationwide) in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and their subsequent parallel but divergent trajectories through the 1940s: agrarian strife under Jim Crow leading to the mild reformism of the New Deal under Roo-

sevelt versus a bloody agrarian revolution leading to radical reformism under Cárdenas. The key difference between the two was the far-reaching agrarian reform implemented in Mexico that expropriated up to fifty million acres of land and distributed it to nearly one million peasants. The agrarian New Deal featured nothing comparable in ambition or scale.

Nevertheless, as Olsson fascinatingly narrates drawing from a wide variety of primary sources in both countries, including extensive use of the Rockefeller Foundation archive, the New Deal and Cardenismo mutually influenced each other through various exchanges of information, ideas, and people. Olsson focuses especially on the north-central cotton-growing “La Laguna” region of Coahuila and Durango, which was Cárdenas's model for agrarian reform throughout Mexico in 1936. As Olsson observes, “The USDA's participation in La Laguna showcased the Cárdenas government's surprising eagerness to enlist New Deal experts in the crafting of its agrarian program. Yet if such exchanges brought a southward flow of rural social engineers, they also enabled a series of pilgrimages to observe US agrarian experimentation during the Roosevelt years” (p. 80).

Olsson's book also sheds important new light on the origins of the Green Revolution. He shows how the Mexican government from the late 1930s

to the 1950s was a willing partner of the Rockefeller Foundation under the auspices of the US government. The Foundation began much of its philanthropy in the US South by experimenting with new hybrid seeds (the precursors of today's GMOs). He also reveals how there were in fact two stages to the Green Revolution. The first was more "peasant-friendly" (p. 132) and rooted in the New Deal's agrarian populism. It aimed to carefully apply lessons successfully learned in the US South for adoption in central Mexico. The second was the US Midwest-inspired experiment in irrigation-, pesticide-, and fertilizer-intensive agriculture. The Midwest version rapidly eclipsed the southern one due to Mexico's rapid wartime industrialization along with the rise of the Cold War soon thereafter. In other words, Olsson convincingly demonstrates that the Green Revolution was not tainted by high-modernist original sin, as many historians have assumed. Rather, it was incubated in the more well-intentioned "low-modernist" geopolitical landscape of the 1930s.

Although the book should appeal to historians of the agrarian New Deal and Mexican *agrarismo* alike, its subtitle, "Reformers and the Remaking of the US and Mexican Countryside," is somewhat misleading. As Olsson states in the introduction, "at its heart this book is a work of southern history, although it seeks to emancipate that region from the straitjacket of national history by charting the US South's rarely acknowledged relationship with its own southern neighbor" (p. 5). Consequently, Olsson focuses substantially more attention on the US South than on Mexico *in toto*—even though the latter's regional differences were every bit as pronounced as those of the United States. For instance, the "barbarous" (to use Kenneth Turner's famous epithet in his 1910 exposé of Porfirian rule) slave-like plantation labor system in the indigenous Yucatán, which bore resemblance to the antebellum and Jim Crow South, was quite different from that of the northern mestizo Laguna. Indeed, Mexican agrarian reformers, including engineers, compared the arid Laguna so-

cially and geographically more often with the arid US Southwest than the humid South. Moreover, there was considerable opposition to Cárdenas's agrarian experiment among unionized Laguna peasants who did not want to join state-run *ejidos* (the agricultural collectives that so fascinated agrarian New Dealers).

Certainly, Olsson acknowledges these strong regional differences within Mexico. Yet overall his narrative still unwittingly tends to flatten the Mexican "countryside" socially, culturally, and geographically. I don't entirely fault Olsson for this; after all, it is what his US informants were inclined to conclude when they observed Mexico and interacted mainly with Mexican elites (who, in turn, did much the same when they visited the United States). But as a Mexicanist, I would have appreciated more explicit emphases and reminders throughout the book that Mexico is a regionally diverse nation whose countryside was essentialized by a relatively small group of US and Mexican elites—and thus comparable to the US South primarily through their highly subjective lenses.

Notwithstanding the asymmetric comparison, Olsson has unquestionably made a major contribution to the historiography of both US and Mexican agrarianism. The book's readability is also a boon for teaching the topic, as it is suitable not only for graduate students but also for motivated undergraduates.

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