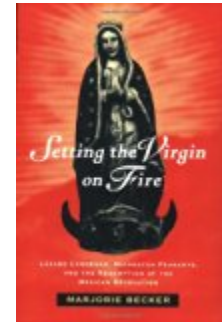


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Marjorie Becker. *Setting the Virgin on Fire: Lazaro Cardenas, Michoacan Peasants and the Redemption of the Mexican Revolution*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996. xix + 188 pp. \$45.00 (cloth). ISBN 0-520-08418-7. \$17.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-520-08419-3.

Reviewed by Drew P. Halevy (University of Arkansas)
Published on H-LatAm (July, 1996)



In *Setting the Virgin on Fire*, Marjorie Becker seeks to examine the cultural encounter and the ensuing conflict between Mexico's post-revolutionary government and the peasants of Mexico. Becker seeks to achieve this goal not simply by examining the political relationship between the two, but rather by recreating the cultural understanding between the two groups. In her introduction, Becker makes it clear that she does not want simply to look at Cardenas as other historians have, but rather to examine the relationship between Cardenistas and the rural peasantry. Writes Becker, "[P]reoccupied by this image of Cardenas as either redeemer or tarnished messiah, scholars have shared an insufficiently political image of the peasantry. Out of a diverse and contentious population repeatedly rising to rectify a varied array of grievances, a stripped-down image of the land-hungry peasant emerges" (p. 4).

Becker seeks to examine the role of Cardenas, asking the question "[W]as Cardenas a rural democrat, as Frank Tannenbaum and Silvia and Nathaniel Weyl insisted so long ago? Or was the Cardenas period Nora Hamilton's 'experiment with quasi socialist forms of ownership and control of the means of production' or Adolfo Gilly's second phase of a socialist revolution" (p. 3).

The main theme of Becker's work is that there was a devout misunderstanding between the Mexican peasants of the countryside and the Cardenistas. The Cardenistas, secular and seeking social justice, had little in common with the Michoacan peasants, devout Catholics who had developed a cult centered on the Virgin Mary. The Cardenistas saw themselves as saving the Michoacan peasants from darkness and social injustice. In essence, according to Becker, the Cardenistas sought to transform

the rural culture without making any great attempt to understand it from the viewpoint of the peasants themselves.

For this study, Becker chose the Mexican state of Michoacan for a variety of reasons, not the least of which was that it was Cardenas' home state, and he also served for a time as its governor. There is also, according to Becker, a great schism between the Cardenistas and the Michoacan peasants.

To Becker, any attempts by the Cardenistas to try to convert the Michoacan peasants were doomed to failure until the Cardenistas came to the realization that they had to take into account and come to terms with the Michoacan peasant's faith and belief system. Until they understood the peasants, they would never be able to draw them into the Cardenista's attempt to transform the social order. Writes Becker, "[I]n seeing the campesinos through a glass, darkly, the Cardenistas committed no more than a commonplace insensitivity" (p. 58).

Becker seeks to show how Cardenas sought to reinvent the countryside to further the revolution. The countryside, according to Becker, represented all that was wrong with Mexico. The Cardenistas, seen as the vanguard of the social force that would transform the countryside and tie it to the revolution, held a dim view of rural life.

Writes Becker, "Cardenistas developed a number of whirlwind catalogs of the problems of the poor. For example, they claimed that health and hygiene were notoriously inadequate in the countryside.... Yet if this reads like an early rendition of moderation theory, it also implies a literal association between nature and brutishness,

suggesting that those who lived close to the soil could be nothing but animals” (p. 67).

The attitude of the Cardenistas to religion is also a major issue in Becker’s work. The issue, in this struggle for the hearts and minds of the campesino, was the question of authenticity, or what was truly the nature of campesinos. Becker writes that “[P]erhaps because in this case Cardenistas viewed both the institution [of the Catholic Church] and its messengers as responsible for campesino inauthenticity, they attacked both the church and

Becker has divided the work into eight chapters, which deal with the transformation of rural society under the post-revolutionary government. The lessons are in chronological order, as they follow the attempt by Cardenas to transform the countryside. The eight chapters are:

1. Introduction: Official History and the Myth of Secular Redemption
2. A Culture of Purity and Redemption
3. From the Margins of Purity to the Margins of Danger
4. Call Out a Posse, Gather Up Their Music, Teach Them to Sing: The Reinvention of the Indian in Postrevolutionary Michoacan
5. Revolutionary Lessons, I: Purity up in Smoke
6. Revolutionary Lessons, II: The Compensations of Indianism
7. Some Lessons of Their Own
8. An End to the Innocence

The quality of Becker’s writing is exceptional. While most authors write proficiently, Becker’s writing is almost lyrical in style and content. The book is not only a quality work on the Mexican Revolution, it is also enjoyable, if somewhat short, reading. The only criticism of the work would be the use of interviews within the text. Becker carried out a large number of interviews between 1985-1990 with people who lived through and participated in this reinvention of the countryside.

Though oral history is an important field of research, I found myself wondering if these people had been interviewed because they were important players in this movement, or simply because they were still alive. While the information gave some insight, an interview with one teacher from Zamora, for example, left one wondering how valid (or important) a source it was.

But this is a minor criticism. Overall the work is quite interesting, and not only for its historical discussion. Becker has given us not only a historical work, but a probing socio-political insight to the inter-dynamics between the peasants of Michoacan and the secular missionaries of Cardenas.

Copyright (c) 1996 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@H-Net.MSU.EDU.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-latam>

Citation: Drew P. Halevy. Review of Becker, Marjorie, *Setting the Virgin on Fire: Lazaro Cardenas, Michoacan Peasants and the Redemption of the Mexican Revolution*. H-LatAm, H-Net Reviews. July, 1996.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=513>

Copyright © 1996 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.