

J. Justin Castro. *Apostle of Progress: Modesto C. Rolland, Global Progressivism, and the Engineering of Revolutionary Mexico.* The Mexican Experience Series. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2019. Illustrations. 366 pp. \$30.00, paper, ISBN 978-1-4962-1174-3.

Reviewed by Joshua Mentanko

Published on H-LatAm (November, 2019)

Commissioned by Casey M. Lurtz (Johns Hopkins University)

For historians of twentieth-century Mexico, biography has long been an important method for understanding major historical events and processes. John Womack's *Zapata and the Mexican Revolution* (1968) and Friedrich Katz's *Life and Times of Pancho Villa* (1998) are foundational to understanding land reform, foreign intervention, and the play of personality in internecine conflicts during the Mexican Revolution. In his second book, *Apostle of Progress: Modesto C. Rolland, Global Progressivism, and the Engineering of Revolutionary Mexico*, historian J. Justin Castro uses the biography of a relatively unknown man to shed light on themes of interest for historians of twentieth-century Mexico contemplating the long-term implications of the revolution. He makes the case for Modesto Rolland's story for explaining the rise of a "technocratic" perspective toward economic development, the shaping of agrarian reform, and the integration of economic and political "peripheries" into a politically centralized nation.

Rolland—"child of the Porfiriato, child of the periphery" (p. 1)—was born in 1881 in the town of La Paz in the territory of Baja California. Not unlike the Yucatán Peninsula, the Baja California Peninsula had a long history of engaging in international trade. Although Castro gives short atten-

tion to the indigenous history of the region, he focuses on the cosmopolitanism of a region of Mexico that was, from the view of the center, still underdeveloped and not quite integrated. Rolland's father was a French migrant who had come to pan for gold in the 1850s, and his mother was a member of a local family. Together, they had eleven children.

Castro moves quickly through Rolland's early life. Modesto was the youngest child. Educated in Culiacán in Sinaloa and Mexico City, he studied at the National School of Engineering, and, taking advantage of a growing demand for engineering education in the last decade of the Porfiriato, he began teaching engineering at the National Agriculture and Veterinary School in 1905. Castro explains Rolland's growing political involvement as an outgrowth of his education in Mexico City. While interacting with people from the humanities and other intellectual backgrounds, "Rolland and his engineering peers held more firmly to science-driven descriptions for making improvements in society." They accepted positions in the government out of a desire to improve Mexican infrastructure, but this group of engineering intellectuals also "acquired a hubristic notion that they were the only ones truly capable of bringing about an improved and modern society" (p. 11).

This hubris or assumption of the superiority of his expertise, as Castro later shows, caused Rolland to overlook local perspectives on various infrastructure development projects he worked on from the 1920s to 1950s.

While Rolland was building a career as a professor and business owner in the first decade of the twentieth century, he was also advancing socially within Mexico City's elite. He was aided enormously in this by his marriage to the seventeen-year-old Virginia de la Garza Meléndez in 1908. Their marriage, according to Castro, was never a happy one. Castro attributes discord in Rolland's first marriage to a personality characterized by a "fierce desire to direct the forces of nature, society, and politics" (pp. 14-15). Castro does not dwell on Rolland's intimate life. Yet, as the above quote makes clear, Castro draws connections between Rolland's public and private personalities. Given that the book is almost exclusively concerned with Rolland's public life, the reader might have welcomed Castro's thoughts about the methodological issues of biography and about where to draw the line as a historian, particularly if it is a matter of sources.

Castro offers a subtle take on Rolland's involvement with "politics" both during the revolution and in the first decades of the revolutionary state. Rolland nested his politics within the "apolitical" framing of his technical expertise and concern. In 1908, he founded the Engineer's Club in Mexico City. Clubs based around professions or political interests were one acceptable way in which to participate in a political discourse about improving Mexico without stepping too hard on the toes of the "elected dictatorship" of Porfirio Díaz. Nevertheless, through the venue of a professional club, Rolland lobbied strongly for political issues. At its birth, the primary issue of the Engineer's Club was the nationalization of Mexican railways. On the eve of the revolution, Rolland attached great importance to state ownership of communication and infrastructure systems, iden-

tifying Mexican ownership of key resources with national sovereignty.

The election year of 1909-10 showcased the first significant challenge to Díaz's rule in decades. A liberal-minded *hacendado* from Coahuila, Francisco Madero, won the nomination of the Partido Antirreeleccionista party in 1908. Risking the security of his own social advancement under Porfirian rule in Mexico City, Rolland, along with other government functionaries and prominent intellectuals, also joined the Anti-Re-electionist Party. By corruption and force, Díaz won the 1910 election, but he was forced to flee Mexico after Madero successfully staged a rebellion from Texas. By June 1911 Madero's moderate liberal and nationalist ticket controlled the presidency and Mexico.

When General Victoriano Huerta ousted Madero in a coup in February 1913, Rolland found himself in a tricky position. Rolland had openly supported Madero during the Ten Tragic Days leading to his fall from power and execution. When he returned to deliver classes at the Military College afterward, he told his students that under Huerta "they would be the instrument of a traitor to shed the blood of Mexicans" (p. 38). Fired almost immediately from his job, he was placed in solitary confinement by Huerta's forces for one month. Rolland emerged shaken from his experience; his security under Huerta was only assured through the intercession of powerful friends. But his business suffered, and he fled Mexico for the United States, leaving behind his wife and four children.

From his base in New York City, Rolland directed the Mexican Bureau of Information. The bureau essentially functioned as a propaganda outlet for the Constitutionalist faction opposing Huerta's usurpation of power. Undermining the push to invade Mexico made by William Randolph Hearst in his newspapers, Rolland and another colleague sent reports about Mexico to over five hundred newspapers across the US, seeking

to shape coverage of Mexico and influence popular opinion and political will against US intervention. After the Constitutionalist-Conventionalist split at the Convention of Aguascalientes on November 9, 1914, Rolland allied himself firmly with the Constitutionals and Venustiano Carranza. Castro sees Rolland's work for Carranza in the US as a kind of "technocratic diplomacy" that usefully complements our understanding of global progressivism as well as deepens our understanding of US and Mexican relations during this period (p. 84). In this way, Rolland's biography adds to recent work by Tore Olsson (*Agrarian Crossings: Reformers and the Remaking of the US and Mexican Countryside* [2017]), and Amy Offner (*Sorting Out the Mixed Economy: The Rise and Fall of Welfare and Developmental States in the Americas* [2019]) about the transnational pathways and mixed public and private careers of the experts who shaped policies related to economic development in the Americas from the beginning until the middle of the twentieth century.

Castro carefully builds the case for Rolland's growing importance in the revolutionary state, showing how Rolland sought to shape policy in areas as far apart as foreign policy to municipal reform. Rolland's intervention in political debates continued to be inflected by economic nationalism. While in the US, Rolland sought to influence the direction of land reform, which had become the dominant issue at this stage of the Mexican Revolution. He published *Distribución de las tierras: Estudio sobre Nueva Zelandia, utilidad de la lección para México* in September 1914. Drawing on New Zealand's nationalization and establishment of an equitable rent system in the late nineteenth century, Rolland did not reflect on the implications of this policy for the Maori in New Zealand, nor did the sovereign rights of indigenous peoples in Mexico preoccupy him. Influenced by the Progressive thinker Henry George's idea of a "single land-value tax," Rolland combined his engagement with global progressivism with a strong

desire for nationalization of key Mexican resources, including arable land.

Except for a stint working for Governor Salvador Alvarado of Yucatán during his brief administration between 1915 and 1917, Rolland never really had a chance to influence the nature of agrarian reform. Alvarado placed Rolland in charge of land redistribution and reevaluation. Rolland "hoped this was the first step toward turning poor Maya peasants into a prosperous, small-property class based on a single land-value tax" (p. 66). The commission headed by Rolland claimed by October 1916 to have distributed land to about forty thousand people. Castro notes that historians from Frank Tannenbaum onward have heralded the radicalness of Alvarado's rule in Yucatán. Castro argues that Rolland's role in land redistribution as part of a broader push to overhaul Yucatecan society shows the influence of Progressivist ideas, alongside the more commonly credited ideas of Andrés Molina Enríquez, in shaping the nature of agrarian reform. At the same time, Rolland's brief practical work, as well as his intellectual contributions, represent more of a foreclosed possibility to the kind of agrarian reform that eventually took shape during the revolutionary state, which emphasized communal *ejidos* and a centralized state adjudication process rather than state ownership.

After returning to Mexico City following the end of Alvarado's governorship, Rolland continued to assume a role in politics, both as a state functionary and as a member of the press. Castro states that during this period, Rolland's career became "chock full of examples of how engineering projects and politics are intertwined." Part of the reason for Rolland's longevity working for successive Mexican presidents—who did not always agree with each other—was his uncanny ability to "find ways to navigate hazardous political waters and to keep himself relevant in top political circles while not appearing overtly political" (p. 105). In one amusing incident, Rolland was made to

take the fall for President Lázaro Cárdenas in 1938 for ordering Juan O’Gorman to change his mural for the Mexico City Airport. Frida Kahlo, Diego Rivera, and Salvador Novo denounced the “modest engineer” Rolland for censorship, but Castro uses this case to show how functionaries like Rolland could be valuable for pragmatist presidents like Cárdenas (p. 177).

In 1920, Rolland was appointed to the Free Ports Commission and the National Agrarian Commission. The idea of establishing free ports—essentially a custom- and tax-free zone—in Mexico dated to the Porfiriato. Rolland’s goal was to use the ports of Puerto México and Salina Cruz to connect Atlantic and Pacific trade. For such a committed nationalist in economic affairs, establishing free ports might seem like a strange goal, especially given the importance the US had long attached to finding a way to more efficiently connect the Atlantic and Pacific. But, for Rolland, free ports also offered the possibility of enhancing trade and general development in the Tehuantepec Peninsula, another “periphery” in need of deeper integration into the nation. The free ports dream expressed a powerful motive regarding development in the first decades of the revolutionary state: “If Mexico did not develop the region for itself and for those foreign capitalists, under Mexican terms, powerful foreigners might attempt to take control of the isthmus” (p. 125). The free ports plan failed to connect Tehuantepec in the way Rolland had hoped, although it took until the 1950s for the project to completely peter out. But already by the 1940s, Rolland had ceased to reject US involvement in the free ports, coming around to the idea—much like the post-Cárdenas presidents—that the role of the Mexican state may not always come down to state ownership, but rather a formula that weighed “Mexican development and sovereignty against the desires of its powerful neighbor” (p. 195). In this balance of interests, the state emerged as a broker between foreign and national capital.

Notably absent in this balance of interest between the Mexican and US states are “locals.” Instead, the rise of technocratic expertise within Mexican state-led development from the 1920s to the 1950s, as told through the story of Rolland, exposes the contradictions of capitalist integration and political centralization in this period. In Salina Cruz, expensive dredging machines dreamed up by Rolland turned into symbols of corruption, not the triumph of expertise and scientific state-making. Nicknamed the “white elephant” by locals and “the mansion of Salina Cruz,” the “strange, massive structure” drew rumors of corruption. Although Castro places doubt on some of the accusations of corruption by local union leaders, he notes that accusations leveled by union leaders and residents “appear to have come from frustration about being excluded and forced to deal with changes they had not desired” (p. 226). The state and the idea of national sovereignty was not always on the same side as locals in these development projects. The state was emerging, as it did in the Porfiriato, as a broker with foreign investors.

Castro’s biography of Rolland amply demonstrates the utility of biography for charting shifts in the role of science in state-making during and after the Mexican Revolution. Rolland’s actions on behalf of Mexican sovereignty over railroads in the waning years of the Porfiriato comes full circle when he invited US investment in the free ports in the 1940s. The hubristic notion that imported science provided all the answers for integrating and modernizing peripheries that Rolland acquired as a burgeoning *científico* during the same period also marks the way he steamrolled over local opinion in the free ports project. This may be one of Castro’s most useful contributions: to link the role of science in Porfirian and revolutionary state-making projects. But rather than suggesting a neat story of increasing importance of science, Rolland’s life shows how technical expertise and intellectual thought were molded both by raw ambition and the imperatives of capitalist

integration. Castro's biography of Rolland not only satisfies the questions it sets out to answer but also leaves on the table many questions about the links between expertise and capitalism in state-led development in the twentieth century.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-latam>

Citation: Joshua Mentanko. Review of Castro, J. Justin. *Apostle of Progress: Modesto C. Rolland, Global Progressivism, and the Engineering of Revolutionary Mexico*. H-LatAm, H-Net Reviews. November, 2019.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=54481>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.