

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**Torcuato Di Tella.** *National Popular Politics in Early Independent Mexico, 1820-1847.* Albuquerque, N.M.: University of New Mexico Press, 1995. ix + 383 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8263-1673-8.

**Reviewed by** Robert H. Jackson (SUNY College at Oneonta)

**Published on** H-LatAm (September, 1996)

In this volume, Torcuato Di Tella (an Argentinean sociologist) examines the causes of political instability in Mexico between independence and the late 1840s. The book is a synthesis and interpretation that builds on an extensive secondary literature as well as primary sources such as newspapers and pamphlets. Di Tella argues, as does Donald Stevens [1], that political instability after 1821 was a continuation of the civil war in Mexico during the independence wars (1810-1821). Di Tella also places this conflict in class terms: as a struggle between the haves and the have-nots, cast in terms of conservative, moderate liberals who were often *escoceses*, and more radical populists who were often *yorkinos*. Federalism vs. centralism entered the ideological mix, as did free trade vs. protectionism. Popular mobilization was an important but also unpredictable and potentially violent element in the conflict, as were the downward economic and social pressures on the middle group in Mexican society that Di Tella characterizes as politically the most dangerous.

The author begins the book with a class analysis of Mexican society at independence, and of the major players, such as liberals and conservatives and the leaders who could mobilize the masses, particularly the urban poor in Mexico City. In the following chapters, Di Tella examines the rise and failure of the coalition created by Iturbide; the transformation of Iturbidismo with the creation of the federal republic and the election of Guadalupe Victoria; the polarization of the political factions during the second half of the Victoria administration over such issues as federalism vs. centralism, the future role of Spaniards in Mexico, and pressures to expell the Spaniards; the popular-based Guerrero administration of 1829-1831, brought to power violently following a disputed election in 1828 and whose reliance on popular support from the lower class unified Mexico's elite; and the creation of shifting coalitions by Santa Anna. Di Tella explains collaboration between conservatives and the

Radicals as a strategy by the Right to allow the radicals to alienate the moderates and then to cut the radicals off (p. 218). For example, Di Tella poses the question of who used whom during the 1833-1834 alliance between Gomez Farias and Santa Anna that resulted in the repudiation of radical liberal reform and the creation of a centralist regime to replace federalism, an outcome advocated by more conservative politicians following the establishment of the federal republic in 1824, but hitherto impossible to achieve.

Di Tella's book is thought provoking and well worth reading. Not all will necessarily agree, for example, with his characterization of the class structure of Mexican society. This section could have been stronger had the author consulted more late colonial and early republican censuses and reports, such as the detailed reports and censuses prepared by local officials in the early 1820s, which contain a wealth of information on occupational structures.[2] The author also does not examine the recent historiographic debate on caste vs. class as the basis for late colonial society, bases his analysis on class, and does not consider race and caste and the fear of "caste war" as factors in elite responses to popular mobilization. Di Tella primarily attributes elite rejection of Guerrero's brand of populism and the excesses of the Parian Riot in 1829 to class considerations, and largely down-plays race/caste, Guerrero's own caste ancestry, or the lessons of the 1810 massacre at the Guanajuato *alhondiga* that certainly influenced elite attitudes. The author describes the Parian Riot as "a general sack of the wealthier shops" (p. 207), and not as an act of popular excess couched in caste terms that repelled members of the elite.[3] In the same chapter on Mexico's social structure (chapter 1), Di Tella is fuzzy on the forms of hacienda labor and rural society in general.

The book has other problems. A serious one is the lack of a conclusion. Di Tella's introduction examines

the major issues to be raised. However, a concluding section would have given the author an opportunity to tie together the detailed and complex analysis offered. On the positive side, Di Tella compiled a detailed chronology of events that supplements the text, but a guide to the various people mentioned in the text would have been equally useful.

These criticisms aside, Di Tella's book is worth reading. This is a book directed primarily toward specialists with some knowledge of Mexican political history at the time of independence and during the early republic, and supplements narrative studies such as Michael Costeloe's history of the federal republic.[4] Scholars interested in Latin American politics following independence should also read this book. It is not suitable for undergraduate classes, but should be read by graduate students specializing in both Mexican and Latin American history.

#### Notes

[1] Donald Stevens, *Origins of Instability in Early*

*Republican Mexico*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1991.

[2] A recently published example of these reports is Ignacio Orellana, *Descripcion geografica i estadistica del distrito de Cuernavaca, 1826*. Mexico D.F.: CIESAS, 1995.

[3] For a detailed discussion of the Parian Riot and elite responses, see Sylvia Arrom, "Popular Politics in Mexico City: The Parian Riot, 1828," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 68:2 (1988): 245-88.

[4] Michael Costeloe, *La primera republica federal de Mexico (1824-1835): Un estudio de los partidos politicos en el Mexico independiente*. Mexico, D.F.: Fondo de Cultura Economica, 1975.

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**Citation:** Robert H. Jackson. Review of Tella, Torcuato Di, *National Popular Politics in Early Independent Mexico, 1820-1847*. H-LatAm, H-Net Reviews. September, 1996.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=583>

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