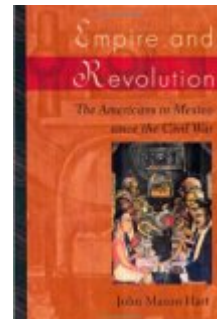


**John Mason Hart.** *Empire and Revolution: The Americans in Mexico since the Civil War.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002. xi + 677 pp. \$39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-520-22324-0.



**Reviewed by** Timothy J. Henderson

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By the standards of academic publishing, John Mason Hart's *Revolutionary Mexico* made quite a splash upon its release in 1987. While Hart's key arguments were not entirely convincing, his style of making those arguments was refreshingly meaty, passionate, and assured: the revolution, he maintained, was nothing less than "a war of national liberation against the United States."<sup>[1]</sup> Economic imperialism by U.S. capitalists, said Hart, operating with the full support of their government, distorted Mexico's development in ways that oppressed, angered, and alienated all strata of Mexican society. If the revolution they made did not bring about a secular paradise for all Mexicans, at least it resulted in the massive expropriation and nationalization of much foreign-owned property, and kept American capital at bay for a while.

That era, according to Hart, looks to be over: American capital is once again unleashed and, giddy with neoliberal excess, busily creating a neo-Porfirian reality. This would seem to be the main analytical contribution of Hart's new book, *Empire and Revolution*. In the latter parts of the

book, he repeatedly draws comparisons between the mischief that American capitalists made in Juarista and Porfirian Mexico and that are being perpetrated today by modern multinationals. Thus, Citibank, J.P. Morgan, and a host of other financial institutions "were involved in Mexico before the revolution, ... returned to Mexico [in the 1980s] after a hiatus of over half a century" (p. 436), and they immediately set about to acquire control of Mexico's natural resources, even as their forebears had done. With the advent of NAFTA and its related reforms, U.S. firms—like their late nineteenth-century counterparts—jumped at the opportunity to exploit cheap labor, snap up real estate, build and control railroads and communications infrastructure, market U.S.-made consumer goods to Mexicans, and in nearly every sense ensure that Mexico's economy would function as a reliable adjunct to the mighty U.S. consumer economy. The U.S. practice of arming and aiding the Mexican government in its fights against the EZLN and the Popular Revolutionary Army of Guerrero—though Hart does not make the comparison explicit—is reminiscent of earlier U.S. meddling in favor of Porfirio Diaz and Venustiano

Carranza. The efforts by U.S. oil companies and their Mexican allies to surreptitiously privatize PEMEX, the state-owned oil company, seems in Hart's account to be the ultimate insult to Mexican nationalism.

Even despite such grave causes for alarm, Hart remains surprisingly sanguine about these recent developments. While noting the obvious fact that free trade has so far brought few benefits to the Mexican masses, he does allow that "free trade might work in Mexico" (p. 498). He even includes a brief paean to the "American dream," which, though it leads too easily to mindless consumerism, still contains a core of Enlightenment values that has proven attractive and inspirational to many people around the world. "NAFTA," writes Hart, "can bring Mexico more prosperity if it avoids the pitfalls that trapped the Diaz program" (p. 505). Those pitfalls would be realized if the United States were to achieve an overwhelming dominance of the Mexican economy, inspiring a nationalist backlash; or if it were to force the Mexican government to neglect social programs in favor of other economic priorities. There are a few peculiarities here: Hart overlooks the curious fact that Mexican nationalism tended to be more pronounced and bellicose during the years of the Cold War, when U.S. capital was less involved, and that the Mexican government did a fine job of neglecting social welfare all on its own during those same years. He glides over the four decades after 1940, giving the impression that Mexico was happily in control of its own resources and that the Mexican government worked with American capitalists "at a cooperative rather than a hegemonic level" (p. 416). If he sees any problem with Mexico's economic development model during these years, he does not mention it. And while he spends considerable time criticizing U.S. banks for their complicity in laundering drug money, and notes that Mexico's own efforts against drug trafficking have been inadequate, he never explicitly challenges the logic of the "war on drugs" itself.

More than half of the book deals with the Restored Republic and the Porfiriato, and another quarter deals with the revolutionary years. The sheer volume of research that underlies these sections is very impressive, indeed. Hart seems to have committed his favorite source, the records of the Mexican American Claims Commission, to memory, and he supplements this source with material from numerous other collections. The analysis is far more understated here than in *Revolutionary Mexico*, perhaps because it is essentially the same; that is, Hart has piled on the minute details, but these details ultimately add little of substance to the earlier arguments. In fact, details become something of a problem: Hart seldom mentions a corporation without listing the entire board of directors by name; he seldom mentions a business transaction without providing precise numbers of dollars exchanged, acreage bought or sold, guns and ammo provided, miles of track laid, and so on. Whole pages consist of little more than names and numbers, with the occasional verb thrown in. And if anyone is still unsatisfied, they may consult the three appendices for still more names and numbers. It would take great literary panache indeed to tell readers far more than they need to know and still manage to be interesting.

It might be argued that the plethora of detail enhances the authority of the book, but the surprising number of factual errors the book contains, although most of these are minor, damages this authority. For example, the Valle Nacional was in Oaxaca, not Puebla (p. 261); Plutarco Elias Calles (whose name is rendered as "Plutarcho" throughout much of the text) was Secretary of Gobernacion, not Defense, for most of 1923 (p. 362); Pancho Villa did not make peace with the Obregon administration in 1923, but rather was assassinated that year (p. 360). Such errors are of slight consequence, except that they tend to inspire some scepticism toward Hart's handling of more arcane, less readily verifiable information. More disturbing are the occasional errors of a ten-

dentious nature, for it appears that part of Hart's agenda is to sully the reputations of prominent American capitalists. In this spirit, he argues that mining magnate William C. Greene was not the rugged, self-made man of legend, but was a very well connected player. Part of his evidence is that the railroad tycoon William Rosecrans had a representative in Mexico named Greene in the late 1860s, and this man "could well have been William's father" (p. 146). Beyond the coincidence of names, Hart offers no evidence to support this speculation, and it seems unlikely. Greene's entry in American National Biography claims that William's father was a Wisconsin farmer who died when William (b. 1853) was very young. Worse yet, Hart introduces us to "Albert Kinsey Owen, the son of famed American utopian socialist Robert Owen" (p. 112). According to Hart, this Owen traded shamelessly on this father's "good name" in order to secure railroad concessions and to hoodwink a crowd of idealistic Americans—in reality, a cheap labor force—to migrate to his utopian colony at the harbor of Topolobampo in Sinaloa. In fact, Robert Owen was Welsh, not American, and Albert Kinsey (not Kinsey) Owen was no relation—he was the son of a Quaker physician from Chester, Pennsylvania.[2] Hart's account of Owen's career, which is decidedly unflattering, may yet be true to the spirit of the matter. David Pletcher, a much earlier Owen biographer, withholds judgment on the question of whether Owen was a visionary or a grifter, and Hart's footnotes do indicate that he did an impressive amount of research into the matter. Even so, it is hard to avoid an unsettling feeling that, in his zeal to discredit American entrepreneurs, Hart sometimes swings a bit recklessly.

*Empire and Revolution* is certainly admirable for the breadth of the research and for its ambitious scope, but there are some reasons—even apart from the superabundance of detail—for wishing Hart had written a shorter and somewhat less ambitious work. The theme is enormous, and it becomes all the more unwieldy as Hart attempts

to be nearly comprehensive in his coverage. His interest clearly lies in matters of economics and business, and it is in this area that his writing is most assured. Even so, he includes occasional asides that deal with issues of culture, such as tourism, cinematic and literary representations, sports, and religion. These discussions are too cursory to add much of real substance. For instance, Hart's discussion of Hollywood's treatment of the Mexican revolution (pp. 397 and 430) consists of less than two paragraphs and mentions only three films: *Viva Villa*, *Viva Zapata*, and *The Magnificent Seven* (he might at least have mentioned *The Wild Bunch*!). Conceptually, Hart appears to champion the "dichotomous political-economic models that see only domination and resistance, exploiters and victims"—that is, the sort of thing that "new cultural historians" say they want to move beyond.[3]

Some of the logical problems that plagued Hart's earlier work remain intact. For example, Hart claims that the money and guns provided by U.S. capitalists and their government were the decisive factor in bringing both Porfirio Díaz and Venustiano Carranza to power. He neglects other factors, such as the breadth of support these men enjoyed and their own considerable talents for political intrigue and manipulation. He goes on to undercut his own argument by drawing a comparison to U.S. aid to anti-bolshevik forces during the Russian revolution, which suggests that guns and money do not automatically lead to victory.

Despite these problems, *Empire and Revolution* makes a major contribution to the literature on Mexican-American relations. Hart may occasionally overstate his case and bobble a fact or two, and his approach may be lacking in nuance. But it is also true that no other author has delved nearly this deeply into the strategies and operations of U.S. big business in Mexico (or, I suspect, in any other country). Moreover, Hart argues convincingly that Mexico—which enjoys the ambiguous blessing of close proximity to the American

colossus--was merely the first Third World country to come in for such treatment. American capitalists used their experience in Mexico to model a global strategy which assiduously sought out cheap labor, cheap resources, pliant markets, cooperative elites, and big profits. No other author has undertaken to examine the theme of U.S. capitalism in Mexico over the course of a century and a half, which enables the reader to appreciate its continuity (even many of the names stay the same, as the descendants of robber barons continue to ply their trade).

Hart has a real flare for timing. *Revolutionary Mexico* rolled off the presses just as the Iran-Contra hearings were gearing up and the arrogance of American power was taking center stage. Today, of course, the forces of "globalization" are having their way, complete with hefty doses of corporate sleaze and rampant consumerism, wealthy nations that self-righteously lecture and bully their poorer neighbors, a U.S. government intent on eliminating the last vestiges of official restraint on business, and a U.S. administration that seems to swagger through the world much the way the Wild Bunch swaggered through war torn Mexico. The reader will likely not be too surprised to find Hart's account depicting Arthur Andersen entering Mexico in the wake of WWII, or the likes of Enron and Halliburton dabbling in Mexican energy. Hart's portrait of generations of America's imperial marauders, heavy-handed though it may be, seems rather fitting in such days as these.

#### Notes

[1]. Hart, *Revolutionary Mexico: The Coming and Process of the Mexican Revolution* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1987), p. 320.

[2]. See David Pletcher, *Rails, Mines, and Progress: Seven American Promoters in Mexico, 1867-1911* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1958), which devotes a chapter to Owen.

[3]. Gilbert M. Joseph, "Close Encounters: Toward a New Cultural History of U.S.-Latin Ameri-

can Relations," in Gilbert M. Joseph, Catherine C. Legrand, and Ricardo D. Salvatore, eds., *Close Encounters of Empire: Writing the Cultural History of U.S.-Latin American Relations* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), p. 4.

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