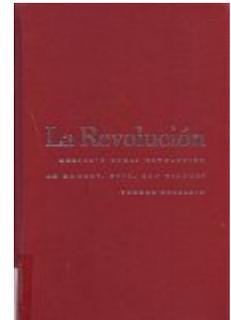




**Thomas Benjamin.** *La Revolución: Mexico's Great Revolution as Memory, Myth, and History.* Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000. xi + 237 pp. \$40.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-292-70880-8.



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### The Discourse of Memory

With a focus on the years between 1910 and 1940 and on Mexico City's elite and middle class, Thomas Benjamin's *La Revolución* traces the development of the Mexican Revolution as an idea. Benjamin finds that the revolution was perhaps as much the product of discourse as it was of military and political action. It was discourse, he argues, that united the discrete events and factions of the decade of fighting (1910-1920) into a single revolution, and made that revolution so central to how Mexicans came to view their country that the Mexican Revolution and Mexican nationality ultimately became one.

The book is divided into two sections. The first section, entitled "Construction," is a chronological look, in three chapters, at how the idea of the revolution developed. Benjamin attributes the revolution's rhetorical construction largely to people whom he calls the "voceros of the revolution": "scribblers, journalists, politicians, intellectuals, propagandists, and other insurgent spokesmen and women" (p. 13). These voceros, he discovers, began describing the revolution as a cohesive en-

tity already during the period of Madero's presidency (1911-13). They also started to portray it as the third great event in a larger liberal narrative, already well established during the old regime of Porfirio Díaz, about the heroic formation of the nation—the first two were the rebellion of Miguel Hidalgo that started the independence struggle and liberalism's Reform-era victory over its conservative foes. The rudimentary invented tradition of the Maderistas never became dominant, because there was not enough time for it to establish itself over rival discourses before Madero was removed from office. It would, however, influence later interpretations.

From 1913 to 1920, Benjamin indicates, the followers of Venustiano Carranza struggled to produce their own official memory, though again, due to factional competition from Zapatistas and Villistas who were still in the field against them, the Carrancistas never completely won the propaganda contest. Still, they did hold advantages over other factions. They had the revolution's largest "intellectual" cohort and made concerted efforts to disseminate their vision of the revolution

through newspapers that they subsidized and an information bureau in the United States. They also censored, when possible, the expressions of their opponents. One Carrancista initiative was to discount memories of Madero's initial phase of the revolution by promoting March 26th--the day on which Carranza's "Plan of Guadalupe" was promulgated in 1913--as the chief occasion of revolutionary commemoration at the expense of November 20th, the day on which Madero had called for the rebellion to begin in 1910. In Carrancista propaganda the stiff and patriarchal Carranza was associated with class struggle, and General Victoriano Huerta, the "reactionary" who had overthrown Madero, was placed squarely in the role of Judas.

With Alvaro Obregón's overthrow of Carranza in 1920, memories of Madero's uprising were rehabilitated, as November 20th became "revolution day." The various factions, Benjamin contends, were now placed on more equal footing, since both the Zapatistas and the Villistas joined Obregón's coalition. As the revolution's preeminent military hero, Obregón spent little time worrying about symbolism. The same was not true, however, of his successor in the presidency, Plutarco Elías Calles (1924-1928), whose administration developed the ideas that the revolution was ongoing as government, and that there existed a "revolutionary family" that included members of all factions. The revolution as idea, Benjamin believes, was complete by 1928, when Calles left office, "but for a few flourishes" (p. 68). The main subsequent flourish was that in 1929, after Obregón had been elected, controversially, to another presidential term and then assassinated shortly thereafter, Calles and his collaborators sought to heal the new wounds by crafting an official revolutionary party, which would take a more "organized approach to cultural hegemony" (p. 94).

The book's second section, "Performance," is ordered topically, with chapters examining festi-

vals, monuments, and the writing of history. The chapter on festivals focuses on the commemoration of November 20th. Throughout the nineteenth century, Benjamin notes, Mexican leaders used civic festivals to teach political values, via hero worship, to largely illiterate Mexicans. The revolutionaries tapped directly into this tradition. Initially, revolutionary commemorations were run by voluntary organizations, and the focus was on musical-literary evenings (*veladas*) and pilgrimages to the grave sites of prominent revolutionaries. But about 1930, as part of the more organized approach to cultural hegemony, the national government took November 20th over and turned it into a parade, a spectacle that promised to appeal more effectively to the masses. Almost immediately, athletes--sometimes real and sometimes flabby bureaucrats in disguise--assumed the primary place in these parades. Benjamin argues that the athletic theme was crucial to the dominant image of the celebrations, which was that of a "vigorous Mexico arising" as proof that the sacrifices of the revolution had not been in vain. Not surprisingly, the path traced by November 20th parades in Mexico City passed monuments and followed streets with names that highlighted the liberal version of the nation's past.

The book's next subject is the capital's Monument to the Revolution. Benjamin states that the building of this monument during the 1930s (it was completed in 1938) was one of the first official efforts to transform the many revolutionary traditions into a single one; all factions were to be embraced beneath the structure's spacious, towering dome. The initial hope was that the monument would transcend personalism, but soon after it was completed the revolutionary state began to oversee the transfer of the bodies of important revolutionaries into the building's piers. The regime had evidently come to believe that personalism was necessary to capture Mexican imaginations--that without these revered remains the monument lacked the sacred aura it required. With personalism victorious, the new goal was

simply to value the enclosed caudillos with equal fervor. Benjamin remarks that celebrations of November 20th were not held at the Monument until the late 1940s, during the administration of Miguel Alemán; he hypothesizes, correctly I think, that such symbolism was then growing more important as Mexican leadership grew more conservative.

*La Revolución* concludes with an exploration of the writing of history. The first revolutionary histories were highly partisan accounts by participants, but soon after its creation in 1929 the official party showed interest in making history serve the notion of revolutionary unity. That interest did not bear fruit until the late 1930s, when it helped produce a "semi-official" and moderately successful effort, edited by José T. Meléndez, to draw different factional interpretations together in two volumes. Hoping for more, in 1949 the party sponsored a competition with the aim of producing an integrated history of the revolution. The result, published in 1951, was a book by Alberto Morales Jiménez that hit all the right notes, blaming factional differences on the reaction's ability to divide right-minded revolutionaries. Two years later the Instituto Nacional de Estudios Históricos de la Revolución Mexicana (INEHRM) was created to promote official history. The INEHRM soon became responsible not just for subsidizing and publishing historical work, but also for commemorations of the revolution, the independence movement, and the Reform.

All this amounts to an extremely useful road map for scholars interested in the political culture of twentieth-century Mexico. Benjamin's thorough research clearly establishes the pace at which the construction of the revolution took place, when monuments were built and revolutionary leaders honored. He invariably provides background on his topics, so that the road map extends back into the nineteenth century as well, and his demonstration of the continuities of discourse and commemoration is irrefutable. His conclusion, mean-

while, carries us into the latter half of the twentieth century for a brief exploration of how the revolutionary tradition was ultimately used by protestors, especially after 1968. Benjamin also has a good eye for detail, as when he cites Carrancista author Edmundo González-Blanco to the effect that the "radical communism" of Zapatismo represented "the most absurd reactionary ideal" (p. 62).

That this work is directed, in part, toward an undergraduate audience is evident in its supplementary features, which include the capsule biographies of Mexico's national heroes with which it begins, and periodic chronologies that help contextualize the invention of the revolution. The capsule biographies are uneven in their coverage--some are much longer than others and some encompass posthumous careers while others do not. The use of chronological tables, meanwhile, contributes to the repetition from which this work suffers. Still, these facets of the book do help make it an excellent resource for the classroom, though here the most important factor is merely Benjamin's willingness--a rarity among scholars of culture--to discuss complicated issues in accessible (if sometimes awkward) prose.

Benjamin's concept of the *voceros* of the revolution is excellent in that it draws attention to the many small-time participants in the molding of memories of the revolution. Moreover, he is correct in arguing that the state's role in generating cultural messages was limited in comparison to that, say, of the Soviet Union. In this respect, his work serves as a useful corrective to Ilene O'Malley's overemphasis on state agency in *The Myth of the Revolution: Hero Cults and the Institutionalization of the Mexican State, 1920-1940*. But Benjamin's contention that the *voceros*--"individuals sympathetic to the promise of revolutionary transformation" (p. 32)--acting largely on their own instincts, were the primary generators of the revolutionary ideal seems problematic. The author maintains that the official party did not need to manage revolutionary histo-

ry because mainstream political culture generally favored historical conciliation and that "the government's view of the history of La Revoluci=n seemed to be the same as that held by society in general" (p. 151), but he offers little in the way of evidence or argument to support those assertions. The voceros remain a rather shadowy group in this book, and there is no sense of how Mexicans--voceros or not--arrived at this rough consensus.

Meanwhile, Benjamin does indicate that the Carranza, Calles, and C=rdenas administrations made concerted efforts to spread their notions of the revolution and that the voceros increasingly found jobs in the growing bureaucracy (p. 68). If that is true, one might suggest that these "scribblers" were often motivated by their personal interests in opportunities offered by the state and that, though the state obviously did not control the whole production, its influence on the idea of the revolution was more pervasive than Benjamin proposes. At base, the problem is that Benjamin does not consider how messages were received; nor is he interested--beyond discussion of a few corridos--in ways in which the revolution's lower-class participants may have helped shape ideas about it. Such choices of scope are legitimate, of course--no book can do everything--but having made them the author is in no position to generalize about Mexican society or even, I think, about political culture.

Despite this objection, Benjamin's book is a significant contribution to the field. There is nothing else like it out there, and both scholars and students of twentieth-century Mexico will read it to their benefit.

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