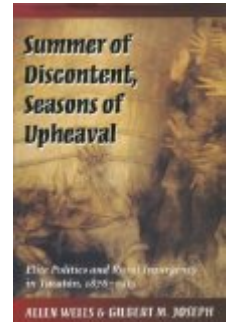


Allen Wells, Gilbert M. Joseph. *Summer of Discontent, Seasons of Upheaval: Elite Politics and Rural Insurgency in Yucatan, 1876-1915*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996. x + 406 pp. \$70.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8047-2655-9.



Reviewed by Barbara Angel

Published on H-LatAm (April, 1998)

Enthusiasts of modern Yucatecan history will be especially pleased to hear that Allen Wells and Gilbert Joseph have joined their considerable talents to produce this complex and compelling study of the late Porfiriato in Yucatan. Both Wells and Joseph have already written extensively about this period in Yucatecan history, and this latest collaboration builds upon that foundation. [1]

In *Revolution from Without*, Joseph advanced the argument that the Mexican Revolution made little impact on Yucatan until General Salvador Alvarado arrived at the head of federal troops sent by the Constitutionalist government of Carranza in 1915. This latest work explains in painstaking detail exactly why and how Yucatecan elites were able to hold back the tide of revolution within the peninsula. More importantly, however, the authors have documented the efforts of various dissident groups, including Maderista politicians and their clients among the campesinos, to challenge the hegemony of the planters. For theorists of revolution, the book addresses the perennial question of why these small rebellions failed to merge

into one big revolution, when all of the necessary preconditions seem to have been in place.

The main focus of the book is the protracted transition from the old regime to the new, a theme which is nicely set up by the quotation from Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* which introduces the book: "The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear." The narrative involves a deep descent into the murky waters of late Porfirian regional politics, and, predictably, the story is an old one—rivalry between elite "camarillas" followed by the mobilization of popular forces by the losers. As in the decade preceding the Caste War of the mid-nineteenth century, the instability of central and state governments created opportunities for dissident factions to conspire against the incumbent authorities with some hope of success.

Joseph and Wells demonstrate that Governor Olegario Molina and his successors managed to stay in power primarily by manipulating local supporters and maintaining links with federalist

politicians, the whole tied together in an intricate web of patron-client networks. As the final "succession crisis" of the Diaz regime unfolded in 1909-10, regional elites scrambled to find a new source of stability at the center. Ironically, Madero's victory did not usher in an era of reform in the peninsula, despite the fall of Diaz and the accession of Jose Maria Pino Suarez as provisional governor on behalf of the Maderistas. In the aftermath of an election which had clearly been "stolen" by the Maderistas, an ex-Porfirista, Delio Moreno, emerged as the heroic local underdog, fighting against Mexican centralism in the form of Madero and Pino Suarez. Apparently in Yucatan, Madero's liberal revolution was stillborn--Yucatecan elites cheered Huerta's assassination of Madero and joined Molinistas and Morenistas in opposition to Madero and his Yucatecan allies.

But the "jacqueries" and various forms of social banditry continued in the countryside, no matter who occupied the governor's palace. As the authors comment, "much in the manner of the nineteenth-century Caste War, the mass participation of campesinos in these rebellions had begun to infuse the struggle with an element of local resistance to elite domination that was now cause for real alarm among the same elites that had initially invited that participation" (p. 239). Although Huerta's coup provided state authorities with the opportunity to declare a general amnesty and payoff local supporters with land grants and commissions in the local militia, those of the rank and file who could not be subdued were executed as "bandits," even though they had previously been called "revolutionaries" or "insurgents" by Morenistas fighting against Madero and Pino (p. 241). Thus, nomenclature became a matter of life and death, as yesterday's revolutionaries became today's bandits if they refused to lay down their arms and return to peaceful labour on the henequen plantations.

As the title indicates, the book is organized into two sections, roughly equal in length, and

chronological in sequence. The first half, "Summer of Discontent," deals extensively with the final decade of the Porfiriato, concentrating mainly on the governorships of Canton and Molina. Throughout this section, the authors skillfully blend economic data with political analysis, documenting the emergence of urban working class participation in electoral politics. The second section, "Seasons of Upheaval," focuses almost exclusively on rural discontent from 1910 to 1913. During this period, several regions erupted into open rebellion, led by insurgents whose revolutionary careers began in opposition to Porfirian governors, and continued against Maderista authorities.

While some of these regional "cabecillas" were bought out or executed during the Huerta regime, others, such as Pedro Crespo and Juan Campos, survived to become regional power brokers in post-revolutionary Yucatan. Wells and Joseph explain these seemingly capricious shifts in allegiances by suggesting that the primary motivation of the insurgents was to protest against local abuses of power.

While the main strength of the book is its finely-tuned narrative, readers will also be challenged by its theoretical depth. By attempting to deal with the thorny question of motivation and come up with a general explanation of why these episodes of resistance and rebellion took place, Wells and Joseph engage in a fairly intense theoretical discussion surrounding the nature of peasant participation in revolutionary movements. The authors attack John Hart's populist notion of a "peasantry unified in struggle," pointing out that even during the epic Mexican revolution, "villagers and peons were rarely amalgamated into durable alliances. Much less did they constitute a campesino class that struggled against landowners" (p. 246). On the other hand, Wells and Joseph are not in favour of a view of peasant consciousness that limits it to local struggles over land, subsistence, or a desire simply to be left alone.

Rather, in the same spirit as recent works by Florencia Mallon and Peter Guardino, the authors argue that campesino insurgents appropriated and reformulated liberal ideology to make sense of their own particular set of grievances and to articulate their visions of a different future.[2]

Finally, a word about sources and methodology--in the introduction, Wells and Joseph indicate that the main sources for their investigation are legal documents located in the Ramo de Justicia, or Criminal Court Records of the State of Yucatan, supplemented by oral histories, notarial archives, and government, ecclesiastical and estate records. In dealing with this material, they utilize an approach associated with the "subaltern studies" school of Indian historiography, in particular the works of Ranajit Guha. The authors claim that official documents can reveal not only the social origins and occupations of the insurgents, but can also establish their goals and intentions, even though masked by the legal rhetoric of official depositions. Elsewhere, Wells and Joseph are careful to set limits to their understanding of campesino motivation, suggesting that the historian has to "infer intention or motivation from the acts themselves" (p. 171).

Summer of Discontent, Seasons of Upheaval is primarily a book for the specialist. Nevertheless, Wells and Joseph succeed admirably in building a strong narrative structure which renders their theoretical preoccupations almost peripheral. The authors state that their book is the "first study of the Porfiriato which aims at the integration of the dynamic of patronage politics at the national, state, and grassroots levels" (p. 5). It is in the dissection of complex political networks where the book makes its greatest contribution to Mexican historiography.

Notes

[1]. Allen Wells, *Yucatan's Gilded Age: Haciendas, Henequen, and International Harvester* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1985); Gilbert Joseph, *Revolution From Without:*

Yucatan, Mexico, and the United States Rev. ed. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1988 [1982]).

[2]. Peter Guardino, *Peasants, Politics, and the Formation of Mexico's National State* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1996); Florencia Mallon, *Peasant and Nation: The Making of Postcolonial Mexico and Peru* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

Copyright (c) 1998 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: Barbara Angel. Review of Wells, Allen; Joseph, Gilbert M. *Summer of Discontent, Seasons of Upheaval: Elite Politics and Rural Insurgency in Yucatan, 1876-1915*. H-LatAm, H-Net Reviews. April, 1998.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=1958>



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