

H-Net Reviews

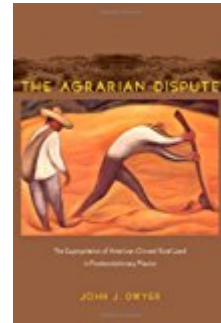
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

John J. Dwyer. *Agrarian Dispute: The Expropriation of American-Owned Agricultural Property in Postrevolutionary Mexico.* American Encounters/Global Interactions Series. Durham: Duke University Press, 2008. 387 pp. \$89.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8223-4295-3; \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8223-4309-7.

Reviewed by Jason Dormady (Central Washington University)

Published on H-LatAm (March, 2013)

Commissioned by Dennis R. Hidalgo



The Best History Research Money Can Buy

Positive resolution of the petroleum expropriation and the subsequent relationship of cooperation between the United States and Mexico is a product of the negotiation over expropriated US agricultural property between 1927 and 1940. More important, this neighborly relationship was shaped not only by quick-thinking Mexican diplomats, but also by local actors in Mexico who pushed the pace of land redistribution in ways that influenced the settlement of US land claims. The diplomatic relationship between Mexico and the United States, argues John J. Dwyer, is “multistranded and multidirectional” as well as characterized by “interplay between domestic and foreign affairs” (p. 282).

Divided into two sections, Dwyer’s lucid prose lays out first the political and land situation in Mexico and then the diplomatic maneuvering that brought the United States and Mexico to an understanding. Section 1 examines the expropriation of over six million acres of land in Mexico from US citizens, both corporations and individuals, in the wake of the application of Article 27 of the 1917 Mexican Constitution. This article allowed state and federal governments to expropriate lands and redistribute them as they saw fit, and the lands of US citizens were no exception. This confiscation (and other property loss by US Americans during the 1910 Revolution) was at the heart of discontent in Washington DC

from Presidents Howard Taft to Franklin Roosevelt and at the heart of much of US/Mexico negotiations. For this study, Dwyer focuses on two of the states where the expropriation was higher than most: Baja California Norte with twenty-one properties and Sonora with thirty-nine properties. Certainly, Dwyer’s emphasis on these properties is more than adequate for making his argument, but scholars of the Lázaro Cárdenas period in such areas as Oaxaca or Jalisco may be inspired to investigate how their areas fit into the larger nexus of land pressure, peasant demands, and diplomatic negotiations. Local politics and land invasions drove much of the Cárdenas policy in these regions, and consequently, the US reaction to the expropriation. Content in this section engages with recent scholars who have worked on this topic, including John Mason Hart, Ben Fallaw, and Adrian Bantjes, as well as with deep research in archival sources.

The second section is perhaps the meatier of the two. Here we see how perceptions of Mexico led Washington to accommodate Mexico’s position in the conflict. Beyond older arguments of security in the context of global war, Dwyer argues that American diplomatic public opinion of Mexico and the romantic US notion of yeoman farmer republican utopias drove the US decision to enter patiently into negotiations with Mexico and to discard intervention. A secure, prosperous agricultural

Mexico was certainly in the best interest of both US security and trade. Chapter 7, the most interesting of section 2, examines Mexican strategies to back the United States into diplomatic corners and essentially to use what Dwyer calls “diplomatic weapons of the weak”: delay, division, and obfuscation (pp. 195-196). Mexico, he argues, successfully delayed negotiations with the United States to create “political capital” at home, then used that same capital to return to the negotiation table and push the United States into agreeing to a settlement. While “weapons of the weak” is not used in the same way that James Scott might approach the concept, the idea is creative and functional. Indeed, the US perception of Mexico as “weak” was as important to the negotiations as Mexico’s own strategies.

There is little of consequence regarding problems in this work, only areas that other scholars can draw on to further their own research. For example, despite a single brief mention that Herbert Hoover had begun the process of reconciliation that led to the “Good Neighbor” policy, Dwyer certainly could have improved the evidentiary strength of his overall argument by offering the Mexican interpretation of Hoover’s pledge to improve relations and public release of the 1928 Clark Memorandum in 1930 that urged a divorce between the Roosevelt Corollary and the Monroe Doctrine. Indeed, memo author, undersecretary of state and ambassador to Mexico, Joshua Reuben Clark Jr., is mentioned only in passing. However, as Hoover said of Clark’s service: “Never have our relations been lifted to such a high point of confidence and cooperation, and there is no more important service in the whole foreign relations of the United States than this.”[1] Did Clark help sabotage talks? Did he prepare the way for Josephus Daniels? Are resources on Clark even available? Such information would not make or break Dwyer’s case in the least, but it does illustrate that there is room here for future scholars to expand on this area of research.

Dwyer’s work, issued in 2008, has been referred to as “cleverly written” by Eric Van Young and a “significant contribution” by Christopher Boyer who says it shapes the narrative of Cárdenas in ways that “subsequent historians will need to take into account.”[2] In short, it has and will continue to be well received by some of the most influential scholars on the history of modern Mexico. But Dwyer’s work is important for other reasons related to both the quality and content of his scholarship. As his introduction points out, his research happened in “two countries, seven cities, and sixteen archives and libraries,” and was funded by eleven grants, including a

Fulbright Fellowship (pp. xii-xiii). In crude terms, it is the best history research money can buy. More important, Dwyer, who earned a PhD from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and is currently an assistant professor at Duquesne University, is illustrative of the true condition of our profession. Despite woeful laments in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* about the domination of pedigree over projects, *The Agrarian Dispute* is a good example of how truly solid research can and will be funded. Students of Latin America toiling away on dissertations everywhere should look to Dwyer’s scholarship for inspiration and (in the current economic climate) garner hope for what hard work, clear writing, and good research can lead to.

In sum, researchers and students interested in the diplomatic interaction of Mexico and the United States will find the book extremely useful. Scholars of Cárdenas will probably add it to their bookshelves alongside other post-revisionist authors. For scholars of agrarian and popular movements, the book will be an effective tool for illustrating the power of local-level actors, and those looking for comparative cases in world history will find it interesting as well. This reviewer would not recommend the book for undergraduate classrooms in general Mexican history, for while the writing is clear, concise, and well argued, the story is not one of the great engaging tales of modern Mexican history from which there are so many to choose—though this is entirely a matter of personal taste. Professors teaching courses on US-Mexican relations should definitely add this to their syllabi, and it should become standard for all graduate students of twentieth-century Mexico or US diplomatic relations. It should also shape lectures and scholarship on Cárdenas, agrarians, US-Mexican relations as well as the broader implications of local agency for decades to come.

Notes

[1]. Herbert Hoover to Joshua Reuben Clark Jr., letter accepting the resignation of J. Reuben Clark Jr. as US ambassador to Mexico, February 28, 1933, John T. Woolley and Gerhard Peters, The American Presidency Project, Santa Barbara, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?~pid=23440>.

[2]. Eric Van Young, review of *Agrarian Dispute*, by John J. Dwyer, *The Journal of Social History* 43, no. 4 (Summer 2010): 1121-1122; and Christopher Boyer, review of *Agrarian Dispute*, by John J. Dwyer, *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 29, no. 3 (July 2010): 393-394.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-latam>

Citation: Jason Dormady. Review of Dwyer, John J., *Agrarian Dispute: The Expropriation of American-Owned Agricultural Property in Postrevolutionary Mexico*. H-LatAm, H-Net Reviews. March, 2013.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=31706>



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