
Reviewed by Gregory Swedberg (Manhattanville College)

Published on H-LatAm (July, 2017)

Commissioned by Andrae Marak

Mexico’s Lurch to the Right

Renewed scholarly interest in the personalities that contributed to the institutionalization of the Mexican Revolution has produced some fine analyses of Mexico’s transition to a single party authoritarian state following its momentous revolution (1910-20). The most recent contribution, *Sons of the Mexican Revolution: Miguel Alemán and His Generation* by Ryan M. Alexander, is a thoughtful examination of the policies and personalities that laid the foundation for the “Mexican Miracle” following World War II. The postwar years, as aptly noted by Alan Knight, marked a victory for “commercialism and consumerism.”[1] Miguel Alemán Valdés (president of Mexico from 1946 to 1952) was a key figure in this transition to mass consumer culture. As Alexander argues, “‘Alemánismo’ represented the driving vision behind an administration that swapped revolutionary zeal for efficiency and pragmatism, and gave favor to industry, commerce, and foreign investment at the expense of ongoing social reform aimed at ameliorating the conditions of the nation’s poor” (p. 5). However, the author complicates totalizing assessments of Alemán’s pro-business mantra by contextualizing the administration’s decisions and humanizing his subject. The book extends beyond government policy, thereby elucidating the values (informed largely by the onset of the Cold War and widely accepted developmentalist policies throughout Latin America) that informed policy and determining from where those values originated. What emerges from this study is a much-needed reimagining of Mexico’s commercial expansion based in part on transcripts of interviews with those who worked with Alemán, university students, business colleagues, family members, and personal friends. These sources coupled with newly declassified intelligence files allow the author to probe motivations in ways that previous studies have not. What emerges is an in-depth analysis of a man who helped shape Mexico’s economic and political trajectory as much as he was shaped by the realities of a revolution that never resolved the issues of corruption and economic inequality.

Organized chronologically, chapter 1 traces the formative years of Alemán. Although he was not born into privilege, he attended prep school thanks to his father’s connections as well as the opening to education afforded by the revolution. These years would lay the foundation for both his legal and political career. Alexander carefully weaves together Alemán’s early influences, postrevolutionary culture, and the opportunities that allowed him to achieve success in both law and business. His educational associations inscribed a sense of social justice that would be greatly measured by pragmatism as he grew older. Alemán also came of age during the 1920s—a violent period—leading many to question the gains of the Mexican Revolution. The de la Huerta revolt, the Cristero Rebellion, and the assassination of President Alvaro Obregón all indicated that the revolution had not resolved some of the pressing issues that had contributed to the conflict. Out of this climate of hope and disappointment, along with the grueling presidential campaign of José Vasconcelos, emerged a political culture that shaped...
Mexico’s enduring single party system, which persisted until 2000—a system that sought to coopt revolutionary elements under a broad tent of nationalism and mestizaje.

Chapter 2 explores Alemán’s transition from law and business to politics. His financial success in real estate dovetailed with Mexico’s stabilization and expansion of the middle class. Between 1932 and 1936 he held several political positions. Most fortuitous was his selection by President Lázaro Cárdenas to serve as a Superior Court justice in 1934. In 1936, Veracruz Governor Manlio Fabio Altamirano was assassinated in Mexico City. Securing the support of Veracruz’s political elite, Alemán was elected to complete the term. According to Alexander, Alemán carefully negotiated agrarian interests, largely supporting expropriation, although he changed course as president. The state of Veracruz had been a hotbed of agrarian radicalism and anticlericalism during the 1920s and early 1930s. The demise of the agrarian movement so strongly supported by radical and moralist Governor Adalberto Tejeda as well as the vehement anticlerical campaign provided challenges for Alemán’s conservative approach. Veracruz’s religious conflict, which erupted in the 1930s, marked a period of continued resistance to the state’s anticlerical policy. Law Tejeda (or Law 197), implemented in the summer of 1931, instituted draconian restrictions on the Catholic Church. The tensions surrounding this law, which had been building for years, erupted in 1937 following the death of a young woman who was killed by police when they raided a clandestine mass in Orizaba. The unrest spread throughout the entire state as citizens seized and occupied churches. Alemán in an attempt to quell the unrest gradually loosened the restrictions in Veracruz. Unfortunately, Alexander does not address the uprising, which could have illuminated how the event shaped Alemán’s thoughts about anticlericalism and the Catholic Church during his presidency.

Chapter 3 examines Alemán’s presidency and the policies that he helped implement. His economic policies mirrored in many ways the developmentalist approaches of other Latin American nations as prescribed by the Argentine economist Raul Prebisch. This approach was not a full embrace of laissez-faire economics, but rather statist approaches that encouraged tariffs, borrowing for large projects, and the development of local consumer markets for Mexican-made goods. More than simply encouraging consumerism, Alemán viewed this as the most viable approach to developing Mexico, an approach that would exclude millions in rural areas. His rural initiatives favored large commercial agriculture at the expense of collectivism or ejido-based arrangements encouraged by Cárdenas, especially in the early years of his presidency. Much of this reflected Mexico’s anti-Communist partnership with the United States (the Truman Doctrine). But Mexico did not create an effective and enforceable system of taxation. Alemán relied on printing money, and staffed the national labor union (the Confederation of Mexican Workers, CTM) with cronies who would do little to represent suffering workers who found it difficult to purchase goods due to inflation. This approach ultimately undermined any real investment in social programs.

Chapter 4 underscores Alemán’s skill in negotiating bilateral relations with the United States. One of the most vital of these arrangements was the creation of a migratory labor program (the Bracero Program) in 1942. According to Alexander, Alemán and US President Harry Truman renegotiated the program to improve treatment and wages for Mexican laborers in the United States. While still not ideal, as explained by Debora Cohen in her book Braceros, Migrant Citizens and Transnational Subjects in the Postwar United States and Mexico (2011), Alexander argues, overall conditions improved. Alemán’s continued negotiation between protectionism and open markets was also vital. To ensure US loans from Eximbank, Mexico needed to steer clear of protectionist policies that US officials would interpret as deleterious to their economic interests or even worse, Communist. This did not prevent Alemán from embracing New Deal Keynesian economic approaches, which he used to construct dams and other vital infrastructure projects. Alemán was able to strike a balance between protectionist policies inspired by Import Substitution Industrialization (ISI) and engagement with the free trade global economy. It was here that Alemán was most adept. He took advantage of the Cold War environment to court US favor while getting something in return, US loans for development projects in Mexico.

Chapter 5 provides a fascinating glimpse into the 1952 election as challengers from the both the right and left sought to unseat the Institutional Revolutionary Party’s (PRI) hold on political power. While Alexander notes that some wanted Alemán to stand for another term (a violation of the constitution), Alemán was not interested. This opened the door to opponents on both the left and right of the PRI. Alemán had not been good for organized labor and did little to ameliorate rural poverty. However, his pro-business focus was not unusual as ISI programs were designed to free Latin American nations from the control of more developed Western economies. However, his use of troops to break strikes and the un-
H-Net Reviews

rest that ensued undermined the CTM’s potency, thereby weakening the labor movement that had once greatly empowered workers immediately following the Mexican Revolution. Former labor leader Vincent Toledano formed a new political party, Popular Party, with the goal being to “contribute to the nation’s democratic institutions and civic life” (p. 160). Many leading artists and intellectuals joined the party, but ultimately it never received enough support to challenge the PRI’s hegemony. The conservative National Action Party (PAN), founded in 1939, also fell short as its members sought to create a conservative realignment that embraced the Catholic Church and rejected the style of corporatism that emerged from the Mexican Revolution. In the end, Alemán’s successor, Adolfo Ruiz Cortines, won by a landslide in 1952, which cemented the PRI as a single ruling party that lasted until 2000. In addition, the Federal Election Law of 1951 ensured victory as the agency was placed under the control of PRI officials.

Alemán did not advance the cause of the Mexican Revolution but instead turned away from it. Why? In the final chapters, Alexander does not deny Alemán the agency of his own misdeeds. The repression of labor, corruption, and economic policies that indebted Mexico are laid squarely at the feet of his administration. But, in my opinion, he rightly notes that the Cold War, World War II, and Mexico’s relationship with the United States also affected Mexico’s shift to the right—a transition that really began in the final years of the Cárdenas administration.

In closing, he notes that Mexico’s shift to the right may have insulated the nation from the coups and dictatorships (most of which were funded and supported by the United States) that plagued much of Latin America following World War II. Perhaps. But Mexico did not fully escape either. The 1968 Tlatelolco Massacre followed by the Little Dirty War purged the PRI’s detractors, painting most of them as Communists as so eloquently explained in Plaza of Sacrifices: Gender, Power, and Terror in 1968 Mexico (2005) by Elaine Carey. Of course, this repressive period hardly rivaled the Dirty War in Argentina, the civil war in El Salvador, or the genocide in Guatemala. But through corruption and repression, consumer forces overran the Mexican Revolution’s lofty goals and Alemán was an important part of the equation.

Sons of the Mexican Revolution provides a welcome analysis of one of Mexico’s most important political leaders at a time when Mexico was at a crossroads. Its crisp analysis, chronological organization, and jargon-free prose make it accessible to nonspecialists and undergraduate students alike.

Note


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

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


URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=48689

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