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Mexico and the Making of the International Economic Order

For at least two generations, historians have asserted that the older, modernist paradigm of one-way flows of ideas, institutions, and interests (as well as technology and capital) from north to south is flawed and inaccurate. That view held that Latin Americans (for instance) were passive mimics, importers, adopters, or perhaps victims of northern interests. The dependista approach offered one critique of this paradigm but little guidance for alternative interpretations. The transnational and global turns of the last few decades have helped us think more critically about historical north-south interactions, and as a result, historians and other scholars have played with frameworks of exchange, entanglement, circulation, and co-production. In spite of extensive attention to interaction and mutual influence, however, rarely have scholars offered compelling and fine-grained accounts of co-production on a transnational scale, or of significant south-to-north influence.

Christy Thornton's Revolution in Development does just that. The book represents a major, trend-setting breakthrough in how we understand the origins and growth of international economic organizations and in how historians can decenter a northern framework and more effectively approach south-north interactions across a wide range of topics. Thornton argues that government officials and experts in Mexico played a critical role in the development of international economic institutions through the twentieth century. Mexicans' efforts represented, in her words, sustained “advocacy of a fairer system of governing the global capitalist economy” (p. 3). Thornton’s transnational approach places the book among a number of recent (and one hopes future) research projects on the co-creation of transnational political ideas and institutions. Her peers in this kind of work include Sarah Babb, Amy Offner, Patricia Clavin, Nitsan Chorev, and Margarita Fajardo.

In successive, chronologically ordered chapters, Thornton examines Mexico’s participation in transnational debates and discussions around the creation and design of international institutions from the 1920s to the 1970s. These include the Inter-American Bank, the Bretton Woods institutions (the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund), the Economic Charter for the Americas, the Export-Import Bank and the International Trade Organization (ITO), the Economic Commission for Latin America (CELAM, in its
Spanish acronym), and the proposed Charter of Economic Rights and Duties of States. The Inter-American Bank and the ITO loom especially large. Mexico’s formal and informal participation in a series of international conferences from the 1919 Paris Peace conference to multiple inter-American conferences over the next half century provide the evolving stage for Thornton’s research and analysis.

At each of these major conferences, Mexican representatives worked to modify and reshape the positions advanced by the United States. One might wish for a kind of prosopography of these men. Thornton occasionally references a “they” that suggests substantial uniformity of interest and outlook. Some were prominent political and intellectual figures, including José Manuel Prig, Jaime Torres Bodet, Eduardo Villaseñor, Eduardo Suárez, Víctor Urquidi, and Daniel Cosío Villegas. Most were mid-rank bureaucrats—trained as economists, lawyers, or engineers—who devoted much of their lives to public service and who play a decisive role in shaping Mexico’s relationship to the US and the Atlantic world. Thornton is not the first to focus on the critical role of these technocrats in twentieth-century Mexico (see earlier work by Roderic Camp or Miguel Centeno, for example) but she effectively highlights their domestic and diplomatic importance here.

Mexican diplomatic representatives at international conferences pushed a remarkably consistent agenda from the 1920s to the 1970s. They implicitly contested the United States’ assumed role as designer and arbiter of the international economic order, an order that favored creditors and developed nation consumers over debtors and producers in the rest of the world. Three issues stand out. First and foremost, Mexico’s advocates asserted the inviolability of national economic sovereignty: each country’s right to design their own economic institutions (taxes, tariffs, intellectual property rights, budget priorities, etc.). Second, they asserted the critical importance of equal diplomatic representation and equal voice (and vote) in international conventions in order to better balance the rights of poorer countries with the duties of wealthier countries. Finally, they sought more consistent access to international capital markets and the freedom to use foreign capital for development projects and programs rather than for debt repayment, for example. In short, Mexican representatives demanded that the institutions of the international economic order recognize and account for the economic and financial needs of poorer nations and their development, as well as the interests of wealthier nations. Thornton lays out the striking continuity of Mexico’s pursuit of these issues to at least the 1970s, though some historians will note that these same interests and debates had been articulated by Mexican intellectuals and officials since the 1820s. Defense of economic sovereignty (against fears of “economic tutelage” or “tributary” status) and access to international capital were long prominent in rhetorical and diplomatic efforts through the nineteenth century.

Two big questions remain at the end of the book. First, to what extent did Mexico’s agenda represent the broader, common interests of poorer, debtor, developing, and Third World nations? In Thornton’s compelling account, Mexico took a leadership role among Latin American nations in debates about Atlantic institutions through most of the twentieth century. Only in the 1970s did countries elsewhere in the world begin to assert their interests and voices in these international institutions in a broader articulation of Third World or developing world (or more recently, Global South) interests, often echoing similar themes that Mexico had pursued for decades. Second, to what extent did the tireless work of Mexico’s agents in international discussions actually alter the structure of international economic institutions? At the end of the day, most of these institutions represented the interests of rich, creditor, industrialized, First World nations (especially the United States). Thornton offers an ambiguous
conclusion: in the short run, Mexico's influence on any particular issue or debate was of “minimal consequence,” and in the long run, she avoids arguing that Mexico's actions “had” significant influence, only that they “reveal broader patterns of ... influence” (p. 11). Did Mexico's efforts over more than half a century yield a “revolution in development,” reflected in the design and structure of international economic institutions? The jury is still out, I think, but Thornton's book gives us a powerful and compelling history of how the interests of developing nations were argued, contested, and often brushed aside. And how, nevertheless, those who represented Mexico in these international debates ensured that their voices were heard, acknowledged, and in some cases accommodated.

This superb book should be required reading for anyone interested in Mexico's foreign policy and domestic development policies—today or in the past. It is also essential for non-Mexicanists interested in the contested status of today's international economic institutions and their history.

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