

MEXICAN TEACHERS AND THE STATE

Unintended Lessons of Revolution: Student Teachers and Political Radicalism in Twentieth-Century Mexico. By Tanalís Padilla. Durham: Duke University Press, 2021. Pp. ix, 355. Abbreviations. Appendix. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$104.95 cloth; \$28.95 paper.
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In August 2022, Mexican authorities acknowledged what activists had been claiming for years: that the 43 normal school students who had gone missing in the southern state of Guerrero on September 26, 2014, were forcibly disappeared by the state. In this, they confirmed the words of the popular chant, “Fue el estado.” It took federal authorities eight years to admit what the victims’ families and journalists had long argued, namely that drug traffickers, along with elements of the Mexican military and other federal officials, conspired in the disappearance and subsequent coverup of what came to be known as “Ayotzinapa’s Missing 43.”

Historian Tanalís Padilla dedicates her book to the Missing 43 and in its opening pages describes that tragedy in detail. Indeed, Padilla argues, one cannot fully understand the events of September 2014 without considering the long history of teacher militancy in Mexico. Over the course of the introduction, eight body chapters, and an epilogue, Padilla excavates the history of teacher activism and rural education policy and effectively frames this history as evolving through a series of contradictions. As one of Padilla’s interviewees, retired teacher José Santos Valdés, put it, there was an “insurmountable contradiction” in carrying out socialist education in a country “with a system based on private property” (81). In her comprehensive analysis of an ever-evolving education policy, which she covers in impressive chronological and geographic scope, Padilla demonstrates the persistence of this contradictory dynamic, in which education policy was an instrument of “state consolidation” but also “grounded in the notion of agrarian justice” (5).

Padilla tracks the broad sweep of education policy over the course of the century while centering a radical minority of teacher activists and their vision for a more just future. Through exhaustive archival research and more than 50 interviews with education workers, she analyzes the rise of socialist education policy in the 1920s and 1930s, the effect of 1940s urbanization on rural education, and the conservative Catholic and anticommunist backlash against federal education efforts in the 1950s.

For the second half of the twentieth century, Padilla describes the intersection of teacher activism and new models of radical politics, including armed guerrilla struggle (Chapter 5) and the emergence of New Left and urban student movements in the 1960s. She also reckons with President Luis Echeverría’s contradictory *sexenio* (1970–76) and the ways in which activists challenged this period of reformism and at the same time were shaped by it (Chapter 8).

The epilogue takes readers through the neoliberal reforms of the 1980s and the persistence of normal school student activism into the 2000s. Padilla excels at highlighting on-the-ground voices and experiences while providing the reader at the same time with a detailed description of policy shifts at the national level. In addition, the book is graced with a series of images drawn from archival sources and teacher-produced public art.

Even as Padilla provides readers with a wealth of empirical information, she makes a number of important historiographical interventions. In the long-running debate over how to understand the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) and the state it controlled, Padilla concisely summarizes the ruling party's approach: "While the PRI's tried-and-true strategy of co-optation was by definition a less violent method of suppressing dissent, its success depended on the ever-looming threat of violence—the violence of the stick or the violence of poverty" (15). Padilla also pays close attention to the way education policy intersected with questions of indigeneity and gender, pointing to its key role in the assimilative project of *mestizaje*. Further, the author carefully balances the accomplishments and limitations of a radical minority of normal school activists who played a disproportionately prominent role in Mexican politics but did not always command the sympathy of their colleagues or the communities they served.

In this way, and in others, this book successfully demonstrates how contradictions are central to Mexican history and why they must be central to our own analytical approaches. Education planners and their policies tell us something, but the beauty of this book, and history more broadly, is in illustrating how the most humble among us become historical protagonists in unexpected ways.

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BOOK NOTES

Hernán Cortés revisado: 500 años de la conquista española de México (1521–2021). Edited by Felix Hinz and Xavier López-Medellín. Madrid and Frankfurt: Iberoamericana and Vervuert, 2021. Pp. 336. Illustrations. Notes. Indices. \$37.00 cloth.
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This collection of essays is one of several that mark the 500th anniversary of the Spanish invasion of Mexico led by Hernán Cortés. It focuses nominally on changing views over time of the leader of the expedition, who has been variously praised and vilified over the centuries. The authors are largely from Mexico and Europe and include some of the leading scholars on the Invasion and the period, such as Bernard Grunberg, María del Carmen Martínez, and Patrick Lesbre.