

Mexico Insurgent

Chuck Morse

February 2003

Contents

<i>Mexico under Siege: Popular Resistance to Presidential Despotism</i>	3
<i>Homage to Chiapas: The New Indigenous Struggles in Mexico</i>	4
Critique	5
Conclusion	7

Everyone knows that Mexico has a long and vibrant revolutionary tradition. This fact is easy to discover, whether you read Wall Street preoccupations about Chiapas or crack open any given left-wing magazine.

What is more challenging is to understand the inner logic of the tradition, both historically and in its contemporary manifestations. It is also essential: U.S. activists need to develop a substantive grasp of this tradition to build meaningful alliances with comrades south of the border as well as a movement in the United States that embodies the best aspects of the political traditions brought by the millions of Mexican immigrants.

Ross Gandy and Donald Hodges's *Mexico under Siege: Popular Resistance to Presidential Despotism* and Bill Weinberg's *Homage to Chiapas: The New Indigenous Struggles* in Mexico provide excellent points of entry into this topic. Both books offer a comprehensive introduction to the Mexican revolutionary tradition and thus should be read by all U.S. activists seeking to develop a more international perspective. Their problems are also helpful because they indicate some of the difficulties we will face while envisioning a revolutionary movement in the Americas.

These books should be especially attractive to anarchists given that the authors all share a genuine connection to the anarchist tradition. Weinberg is a longtime participant in New York's anti-authoritarian milieu, and Gandy and Hodges have their own links to the movement; for example, Hodges is the author of *Mexican Anarchism after the Revolution* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), and Gandy describes himself as a participant in anarchist collectives (among other things) in the "About the Authors" section of *Mexico under Siege*.

Mexico under Siege: Popular Resistance to Presidential Despotism

Mexico under Siege chronicles the popular opposition to the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), the party that governed Mexico through a web of violence, corruption, and deceit for seventy years under the pretense of democracy. (This mix of authoritarianism and democratic fiction led Mario Vargas Llosa to label the PRI's Mexico as the "perfect dictatorship."¹) *Mexico under Siege* can be read profitably as a companion to Gandy and Hodges's *Mexico*, the *End of the Revolution* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2002), which analyzes the course of the Mexican Revolution from its beginning in 1910 to its disappearance from the political scene as marked by Vicente Fox's election in 2000.

The Mexican Revolution was one of the most far-reaching revolutions of the twentieth century, and its victory heralded major conquests for economic and political democracy. Mexico's 1917 Constitution promised government support of popular movements for social justice, the nationalization of economic resources, the formation of cooperatives, and the spread of collectivism against capitalism. It offered land reform to the peasants as well as the right to unionize, strike, and share in employer profits to the workers. In other words, from the ruins of the Porfirio Díaz dictatorship and bitter years of civil war, a new social contract emerged between the people and state guided by a joint movement toward democracy and equality.

Yet this social contract disintegrated quickly, and people came to understand that the government was not an ally of the revolution but its opponent; *Mexico under Siege* tells the story of those who rose up in revolt. It describes the emergence of movements against the status quo

¹ Vargas made this comment at a televised conference in Mexico City in September, 1990.

along with their strategies and personages, and evaluates them comprehensively. Its introduction is structured around the revolutionary novels of B. Traven—a German anarchist who settled in Mexico after fleeing a death sentence due to his participation in the 1919 Bavarian soviet—and, from there, describes post-revolutionary resistance movements up to the contemporary period. It chronicles the militant labor protests of the 1940s, the revolutionary peasants' movements of the late 1940s and 1950s (which provide the link between Emiliano Zapata and the guerrilla movements of the 1990s), the massive teacher and railroad workers' strikes of the late 1950s, the guerrilla movements of the 1960s, the student movements of 1968 and 1971, the radical labor and peasant movements of 1970s, and of course the Zapatista uprising in Chiapas.²

This book has no parallel in English or Spanish. Although there are many works on specific movements in Mexico and some on particular aspects of the Mexican Left's broader trajectory—such as Barry Carr's *Marxism and Communism in Twentieth-Century Mexico* and Jorge Castañeda's *Utopia Unarmed: the Latin American Left after the Cold War*—this is the first comprehensive treatment of Mexican popular resistance movements as a whole. Although this is a small book (256 pages) and thus overlooks important movements as well as crucial aspects of the movements that are considered, Gandy and Hodges demonstrate a consistent and evolving legacy of opposition. They do so not only by examining the historical evolution of the movements but also by providing a feeling of the organic continuity between them (wherein different tendencies and individuals interacted with and influenced one another). They also supply biographies of many of the leading activists and offer some unprecedented documentation to the historical record; for example, included in the appendix is a translation of The Plan of Cerro Prieto, a program distributed by peasant revolutionary Rubén Jaramillo before an uprising he led in 1953. This translation is based on the sole surviving mimeograph of the original document.

Gandy and Hodges's panoramic study of the opposition ends on a sober note: the Mexican resistance failed to realize its primary goal of breaking the PRI's stranglehold on political power. Although it is true that the PRI was dislodged from power through (relatively) clean elections in 2000, they point out that this was not an achievement of the popular resistance but primarily the result of many different forces and pressures (including pressure from the Right).

Homage to Chiapas: The New Indigenous Struggles in Mexico

Weinberg's *Homage to Chiapas* is an excellent complement to *Mexico under Siege*. While Gandy and Hodges analyze the Mexican popular resistance, as shaped by the legacy of the Mexican Revolution and in engagement with the state, Weinberg provides a topical exposition of the social dislocations and revolutionary movements that have emerged with Mexico's integration into the global economy (particularly as represented by NAFTA). *Homage to Chiapas* and *Mexico under Siege* overlap in many key areas, but Weinberg's work is much more international and contemporary in focus.

² Anarchists are not a factor in the popular movements examined by Gandy and Hodges. Although a mass anarchist movement existed in Mexico for many decades, anarchists became marginal in the 1930s. For a discussion of an attempt to revive the anarchist movement, see Chantal López and Omar Cortés, *El Expreso: Un Intento de Acercamiento a la Federación Anarquista del Centro de la República Mexicana (1936–1944)* (México, D.F.: Ediciones Antorcha, 1999).

Although the Zapatista uprising in Chiapas frames the book, Weinberg's work is really more than an "homage to Chiapas." His book, which also begins with a Traven quote, is divided into five parts. The first describes the long history of exploitation and indigenous resistance in Mexico generally and Chiapas in particular (from colonization, to the Mexican Revolution, to NAFTA). The second section ("A War Cry from Chiapas") shows how this history exploded to produce unfathomable suffering as well as a revolutionary movement that has inspired millions in Mexico and across the globe. The remaining three sections (roughly the latter half of the book) place the first two in a much broader context: they analyze peasant movements throughout Mexico and the circumstances that have catalyzed them; the insidious confluence of political corruption, violence, and crime (especially drug trafficking); and the connection between misery in Mexico and the miserable schemes hatched by U.S. elites.

Weinberg is a journalist (for *High Times* magazine and *Native Americas*) and he wrote this book in a journalistic style. His analysis is not shaped by academic debates or concerns; for instance, he does not contest prevalent theories of social movements or speculate on the meaning of ethnicity in the twenty-first century. On the contrary, his goal is to tell the story—in a straightforward, entertaining way—of the various crises and historical trajectories that have pushed Mexico into a maelstrom of distress and revolt. And he is remarkably successful at this task. Weinberg not only does an excellent job of tracing the sometimes obscure (and sometimes not so obscure) forces and personalities that have shaped the present but also skillfully weaves this together to depict a country torn between five hundred years of colonization, militant indigenous resistance, and new forms of conflict that are radically transforming the social and ecological fabric.

Weinberg's journalism is clearly a form of activism for him, and his commitment to radical social and ecological reconstruction gives him a sensitivity to issues that are often invisible to others. For example, he is exceptionally attentive to the ecological dimensions of Mexico's current crisis: he illustrates how anti-ecological and anti-democratic practices come together to create a desperate present for the poor, and knowledgeably describes the very different relationship between nature and culture found among indigenous people. Likewise, his anti-authoritarian commitments are reflected in his ability to portray social movements that have radically democratized community life and to distinguish these from movements that merely claim such priorities. As strong as his commitments are, however, he completely avoids the temptation to sanctify the opposition or gratuitously demonize elites. For instance, he conveys Subcommandante Marcos's charismatic genius, but also represents him as a bit of a playboy. Similarly, he shows the heinous role of many individuals and groups, but does not saturate them in derogatory adjectives. Weinberg's restraint, willingness to be critical, and desire to let the facts speak for themselves renders his work much more compelling than it would be otherwise.

Critique

Mexico under Siege and *Homage to Chiapas* offer a broad picture of the Mexican resistance in its past and present-day forms. They do so on the basis of original historical research and express a genuine enthusiasm for popular revolutionary movements. Nevertheless, these books both have instructive limitations for those who want to build on their accomplishments.

Although *Mexico under Siege* studies popular resistance to the Mexican state, it is unfortunately not anti-statist enough. There are three reasons why this is the case.

First, *Mexico under Siege* is very much a political history of the leaders, organizations, and programs that guided the resistance to PRI and not a history of the emergence of oppressed classes or groups into historical subjects. For instance, their chapters on the 1958 teacher and railroad worker strikes focus on the organizations and leaders, not on changes in the constitution of the Mexican working class. Likewise, their chapter on the Zapatistas focuses overwhelmingly upon Marcos—his history, political style, and so forth—instead of the development of a revolutionary identity among indigenous people in Chiapas. Although such a political history needs to be told—and certainly the leadership and organizations are important—this approach has a tendency to diminish the political subjectivity of the very people the opposition claims to represent (and who give these organizations meaning).³

Furthermore, the treatment of the organized opposition in isolation from the classes or groups they represent tends to enable those in power to define the key moments in the history of popular resistance. In other words, if the emphasis is on the evolution of a revolutionary class consciousness among workers or an insurgent sensibility among peasants, then events of historical significance occur when this group's radical identity is either fortified, diminished, or transformed. For example, Gandy and Hodges cite an interview with Marcos in which he discusses the moment when the Zapatistas substantively joined the indigenous community of Chiapas: this was an enormously portentous event for Chiapas, and yet completely invisible to the state and its local agents. But what is a historically crucial event for the organized opposition when it is understood outside of its relation to oppressed classes or groups? In many cases, the state is permitted to define what is or is not significant: that is, the movement becomes important when the state decides it is worth repressing. Unfortunately, this approach is evident in *Mexico under Siege*, which can be read as a long list of clashes between disenfranchised people and the system. But, really, what kind of history do we want—a history of us standing up or them beating us down?⁴

Finally, the isolation of the organized opposition from those it claims to represent tends to diminish the centrality of ideological commitments—particularly a commitment to democracy—in the resistance. This question simply loses significance when the people are not theorized as historical actors. Unfortunately, this problem is also evident in *Mexico under Siege*: Gandy and Hodges treat democratic movements and Marxist-Leninist movements as more or less continuous with one another, despite the fact that there is a vast difference between groups that want to impose a dictatorship of the proletariat and those fighting for popular self-organization. This distinction is vital for members of the opposition as well as the state being opposed because movements that want to democratically reconstruct political life pose a much greater challenge

³ For a different approach, see John Lear, *Workers, Neighbors, and Citizens: The Revolution in Mexico City* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001). This book explores the tradition of resistance and independent organization among urban poor and workers in Mexico City from the 1910 revolution into the early 1920s. It also has valuable commentary on anarchist activity during this period, particularly that associated with the Casa del Obrero Mundial (House of the World Worker).

⁴ An emphasis on popular self-organization would draw attention to the massive earthquake of 1985. This disaster killed more than ten thousand people and ruined vast portions of Mexico City. The state's response to this calamity was profoundly inept and often cynical, whereas self-organized citizens' groups emerged to play a vital role in the rescue. The combination of state incompetence and popular self-activity dealt a withering blow to the legitimacy of the PRI—with more lasting consequences than many of the Left groups examined in *Mexico under Siege*—and ignited a militant urban movement. Bill Weinberg comments on this by noting that since the calamity, "Mexico has seen a renaissance of popular movements linked to neither the ruling nor opposition parties" (*Homage to Chiapas: The New Indigenous Struggles in Mexico* [London: Verso, 2000], 202).

to the state than those that merely want to confront it. Indeed, this is revealed in the history of two movements treated by Gandy and Hodges: the student movement and the Zapatistas. The student movement sought to radically democratize political life with its counterculture and advocacy of participatory democracy and, even though the movement has passed into history, the state is still burdened by its legacy in the form of an enduring political sensibility and ongoing inquires into its repressive actions against the movement. The Zapatistas have also made crucial attempts to radically democratize political life (through their autonomous municipalities and democratic consultas, for instance) and of course their uprising has troubled the state for more than eight continuous years. By contrast, the Marxist-Leninist groups have utterly disappeared from the political scene and their memory does little to trouble those in power.

These problems with *Mexico under Siege* illuminate the vast difference between fighting the state and empowering the people, and underscore the necessity (and potential) of integrating this difference into theory.

If Gandy and Hodges can be criticized for some theoretical failings in their conception of the opposition, Weinberg dispenses with theory altogether by choosing a journalistic approach to the subject. As a journalist, his job is to report the facts and tell a story, and as such, he is not permitted to leave the realm of facts. While Weinberg is good at his trade—his book is both entertaining and exhaustively documented—his profession prevents him from speculating on the deeper logic of events or making assertions about the character of social institutions as such. In this sense, even the worst theory is more ambitious than the best journalism, for at least it endeavors to grasp the underlying principles that organize social affairs. And this is an important difference for anarchists: we need to be able to say not only that the Mexican state (for one) is barbaric and irrational but also that these are essential characteristics of states as such. Weinberg's work provides great raw material for such arguments, yet he does not and cannot make them.

Conclusion

These books' problems are related: Gandy and Hodges employ a theoretical structure that does not encompass the breadth of the movements they treat—implicitly, they step away from the history of popular self-organization in Mexico—whereas Weinberg avoids theoretical questions entirely. Even though both books offer nuanced and unprecedented studies of a much neglected history, our collective imaginations will need to be pressed further to grasp the fullness of the revolutionary tradition that has unfolded south of the border.

On the one hand, the demands of theory cannot be avoided. The emergence of a common movement among Mexican and U.S. radicals requires the ability to make claims about the social order—claims that do more than indict a particular story of a particular injustice. And indeed, to incorporate the lessons of the Mexican resistance into U.S. radical movements, one needs to be able to grasp what is universal about its accomplishments.

But the history of the Mexican resistance also needs to be understood in a way that emphasizes the centrality of ordinary people in the process of social change, whether they have risen up in arms or simply tried to keep food on the table. In short, our theoretical premises must (and can) be as radical as our political convictions.

These books provide valuable material for understanding the full breadth of the Mexican radical tradition—a tradition far deeper than normally indicated by the mainstream or Left media—

and their contributions and shortcomings indicate some of the challenges we will face while envisioning a new revolutionary movement in the Americas.

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Chuck Morse
Mexico Insurgent
February 2003

Retrieved on September 15, 2015 from web.archive.org
Published in *New Formulation*, Vol. 2, No. 1.

theanarchistlibrary.org