Ideas: Indigenous Historical Agency in Revolutionary Western Mexico

Recovering and Explaining Indigenous Roles in the Mexican Revolution

Morris, Nathaniel. *Soldiers, Saints, and Shamans: Indigenous Communities and the Revolutionary State in Mexico's Gran Nayar, 1910–1940*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2020, 371 pages.

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For obvious reasons, historians—and social scientists in general—like to big up the topic they research, stressing its critical importance or claiming to rescue it from the "enormous condescension of posterity" (Thompson, 1963, 12). Nat Morris focuses on the Gran Nayar, which embraces chunks of four Mexican states (Nayarit, Jalisco, Durango and Zacatecas): a sizeable (20,000 km^2), but sparsely populated region (the Indigenous population, around 1910, was rather less than 5,000). In terms of its role in modern Mexican history, the region was largely peripheral, subject to mounting external challenges—political, military, economic and cultural—which its inhabitants did not initiate and to which they responded with a range of responses, including covert resistance, armed rebellion, opportunistic collusion and tactical retreat (literally into the fastnesses of the Sierra). In short, all the evasive weapons of the weak and, at times, the confrontational weapons of the strong. So, while the story of the Gran Nayar was peripheral to—it did not substantially affect—the grand national epic of the Revolution (compare, say, the roles of Morelos or Sonora), it was a

story of agency, albeit reactive agency. (Of course, "reactive" agency is often the most common kind.) One obvious conclusion is that the "tropes" of Indigenous inertia—which, as Morris shows, came thick and fast in these years—were based on prejudice rather than fact. No doubt because of its peripherality, combined with the practical obstacles to research in the region, the Gran Nayar has been neglected, if not by anthropologists, then at least by historians (Beatriz Rojas's work on the Huicholes/Wixátari [1993] being a rare exception). As for today's political scientists—who claim to study Mexico—I doubt that many could locate the Gran Nayar on a map. Therefore, the familiar authorial claim that this is a pioneering work that fills a gap is, for once, entirely valid (4).

Morris sensibly blends the narrative of the period, which is at times very dense and detailed, with a lucid analysis of the region's geography, ethnic make-up, politics, economy and religious cultures. The narrative focuses on major episodes: the Revolution (1910–20), the educational policies of the new revolutionary state (1920–25), the two Cristero Wars (1926–29 and 1931–35), Indigenous education (1929–34), and finally, the reformist administration of President Cárdenas (1934–40). The story unfolds at several interlocking levels, from the national state in the making, through the four relevant state governments, the three main ethnic regions, the many constituent municipalities, down to the individual communities, each endowed with its own characteristics and history. The result is sometimes labyrinthine. But the author rightly assumes that without telling what happened, when, where and why, it is impossible to draw any broader conclusions about the historical trajectory of the Gran Nayar. Thus, the sometimes bewildering sequence of local conflicts, cacical careers, recurrent battles, and sudden seizures of power followed by hubristic downfalls, is essential. This approach, I would argue, is reminiscent of the similarly complex micro-history of the French Revolution, in that it is local and bottom-up, skeptical of bland mono-causality, sensitive to regional and local idiosyncrasies, and replete with graphic, often violent vignettes (cf. Cobb 1970).

But in addition—and vitally—Morris makes a brave and successful effort to order the chaos (171–175), teasing out the principal factors that explain the motives and modus operandi of his cast of thousands, and occasionally taking issue—politely but cogently—with some received opinions. Thus, while recognizing the centrality of religious (perhaps "ideational"?) loyalties—Catholic as well as syncretic or "costumbrista"—Morris links these loyalties to

broader issues of community integrity and identity, symbolized by local patron saints, threatened by the loosely allied forces of state power and mestizo immigration. Hence the recurrent conflicts, seen elsewhere in revolutionary Mexico, between intrusive "cosmopolitans" (as Morris calls them) and embattled local "conservatives." At the same time, communities clashed with each other, locked in "dyadic rivalries" with neighbours (again, a pattern endemic to twentieth-century rural Mexico). The Revolution fomented such clashes while training younger men in the ways of violence—hence the crucial phenomenon of local self-defence forces, which in turn undermined traditional gerontocratic authority based on the cargo system. The result was a violent, turbulent caciquista politics, fuelled by personal and collective feuds, and characterized by Machiavellian opportunism, practised by the God-fearing Cristeros no less than their revolutionary enemies.

Morris calls his book a piece of "anthrohistory," following in the distinguished footsteps of Paul Friedrich (1987)—another perceptive analyst of Machiavellian "low politics" in rural Mexico. I would generalize that any curious historian of revolutionary Mexico—especially, but not only, those interested in rural and provincial processes—must be a bit of an amateur anthropologist, at least in the basic sense of knowing both the pioneering research of the period, which Morris uses effectively (for example, Preuss, Lumholtz, Hrdlicka, and Zingg—researchers whose undoubted prejudices do not disqualify their useful reportage), and the more recent, more "scientific" work of Weigand, Coyle, Liffman, et al. Morris, however, goes beyond this basic acquaintance: although trained as a historian, he makes good use of anthropological research, in the sense of conducting in-depth fieldwork in the region (not the most accessible or welcoming place in the world, especially given the recent upsurge in drug-related violence), fieldwork that required commitment, diplomacy, and resourcefulness. As his endnotes make clear, he productively mined the relevant national and regional archives, but also drew on a wide range of interviews and field notes. Of course, neither source is objectively reliable; both archival and oral histories contain myths and prejudices, and they sometimes clash. Ultimately, it is up to the historian—or anthrohistorian—to balance and blend the two, as Morris does judiciously. Unlike some historians—those interested in 1968 and Mexico's Dirty War, for example—he does not give uncritical credence to his interlocutors.

A final clarification about "serranos." Of course the term—denoting, roughly, "highlanders" ("people of the sierra")—is old and "emic" (that is, used by historical actors about themselves or their contemporaries, not an ex post "etic" invention of social scientists). It was certainly in regular use in Porfirian and revolutionary Mexico. I adopted it many years ago in order to clarify, by means of a simple typology, popular participation in the Revolution. It was, I admit, something of a back-of-the-envelope formulation, designed to distinguish between, on the one hand, agrarian/agrarista rebels like Zapata—those motivated by grievances over land, typically in class-conscious terms (thus peasants versus landlords, the latter usually hacendados, or sometimes rancheros) and, on the other, peasants (broadly defined as the rural poor) whose chief target was not rich expansionist landlords (who were few and far between in the sierras) but rather the growing oppressive power of the state and its agents on the ground. "Serrano" was a handy shorthand for Eric Wolf's "poor peasantry in … a peripheral area beyond the normal control of central power" (1971, 291). I recognized that some rebels of this genre—though a minority—did not in fact inhabit remote highland regions; also that "serranos" could contest revolutionary as well as Porfirian state power. I still think the concept, even if it is fairly fuzzy, has some utility. Other historians seem to have found it useful. Morris chooses to employ it (7, 188); a usage which Liffman questions. It's true that agrarian conflicts—pitting Indigenous peasants against mestizo rancheros—were important in the Gran Nayar, as elsewhere in Mexico. However, such conflicts were much less efficacious in promoting sustained collect peasant mobilization leading to land reform (de facto and later de jure), as occurred in Morelos and other regions of central Mexico. Rather, in the Gran Nayar, localized agrarian conflicts led to endemic factionalism and political fragmentation. The Gran Nayar lacked the dynamic, expansionist, commercial haciendas of Morelos, Puebla, Tlaxcala, or La Laguna; not surprisingly, it failed to generate a powerful, sustained popular agrarian movement along the lines of Zapatismo.

On the other hand, the belated, often coercive and corrupt use of state power—mediated through the military, schools, land reform and political appointments—provoked a robust, if chaotic and decentralized, resistance. For the reasons already mentioned, which are amply described in this book, the communities of the Gran Nayar often repudiated the pretensions of the state and sought to repulse them—a struggle which achieved short-term results but which, over time, could not halt the onward march of the state and its politico-economic allies, such as the mestizo rancheros. Thus, when Morris, quoting

Weigand, stresses that the people of the Nayar sought the "defence of their communities, of their communal structures, and of the cultural autonomy of the area" (162) he is not, in my view, "re-defining" the "serrano" concept, but using it much as it was originally intended.

References

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