

*Hacia la república del trabajo: la organización artesanal en la ciudad de México, 1853–1876.* By CARLOS ILLADES. Mexico City: El Colegio de México/Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana Iztapalapa, 1996. Tables. Graphs. Bibliography. Index. 230 pp. Paper.

In the past two decades, scholars of Latin American history have significantly advanced our knowledge and understanding of the lives of working people by employing the methods of the “new labor history,” first used in the study of European and North American laborers. In this well-documented and sophisticated book, Carlos Illades continues the successful employment of these methods in his study of Mexico City’s artisans during the third quarter of the nineteenth century.

The years between 1853 and 1876 were difficult ones for the capital city’s artisans; they often found themselves with little or no work. Unemployment among artisans was so prevalent that government officials and police authorities often mentioned artisan and *vago* (homeless) in the same sentence. Illades argues that internal warfare, foreign invasions, and the country’s general political instability all contributed to a fall in demand for manufactured products and the subsequent fall in employment.

At the same time that artisans found themselves increasingly out of work, the institutions that defended and aided them came under attack. The prevalence of liberal ideology among Mexico’s governing elite and the opposition to religious and corporate bodies led to the end of the two institutions artisans relied on, the guild and the *cofradía*. To respond to the difficulties they continued to face, the artisans then created mutual aid societies and cooperatives; they even went on strike. Their struggle to organize and defend themselves culminated in 1876 with the Congreso Obrero.

Illades describes the relationship between artisans and the state during this period as harmonious. The artisan organizations avoided conflict with the state; and the government, in turn, often did not enforce laws already on the books, such as those making strikes illegal. While the government may not have directly attacked artisans and their organizations, however, some of the laws it passed undoubtedly hastened the demise of many of the artisan organizations, such as the guild.

Illades’s arguments throughout are well supported with evidence from newspapers and cases from the Tribunal de Vagos, as well as decrees, laws, and manifestos produced by both the government and the artisan organizations. The author also successfully employs the new labor history approach. Particularly interesting is his analysis of language, as pioneered by William Sewell in his study of French workers, to examine how the artisans’ views changed throughout this period. Illades’s study of Mexico City artisans is a welcome addition to the literature of Latin American and Mexican labor history.

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