

Civil Society in Twentieth-Century Mexico

Introduction

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Is civil society good to think? No, at least according to Mexico's current president, Andres Manuel López Obrador (AMLO). In February 2019, AMLO confessed that he did not know many members of "so-called civil society." The reason was simple. "Civil society" was not something "of the left." In Mexico, it was intimately linked to conservatism. It was big business that promoted the concept (presumably excluding his chief of staff, Alfonso Romo, who contented himself with running a political party). And in reality, it was little more than a convenient "flag."¹ As researchers have pointed out, this kind of disparaging of civil society is nothing new. In fact, it has become a feature of AMLO's morning press conferences. Of the thirty-two times he has mentioned "civil society," twenty-nine times he has conferred negative connotations on it.²

For most of the twentieth century, most commentators agreed with the notion of civil society now promoted by AMLO. Intellectuals, social scientists, and historians played down the scope, force, and import of Mexico's civil society. As Ben Fallaw demonstrates in his article below, in the immediate aftermath of the Revolution, left-wing intellectuals dismissed civil society as the preserve of counterrevolutionaries, while right-wing thinkers often struggled against the organizing power and potentially egalitarian urges of the Mexican masses.³

1. "AMLO dijo que la Sociedad Civil tiene que ver con el conservadurismo, Mariana Olvera y Alberto Solís," *Milenio*, YouTube video, 19 February 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3dCRabc-MR8>.

2. Samantha Fernández and Juan Ramón Moreno, "El sesgo discursivo de AMLO hacia la sociedad civil," *Animal Político*, 25 February 2019.

3. Beatriz Urías Horcasitas, "Una pasión antirevolucionaria: El conservadurismo hispanófilo mexicano (1920–1960)," *Revista Mexicana de Sociología* 72, no. 4 (2010): 599–628.

During the heyday of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), Mexican public intellectuals and foreign observers continued to hold this line, arguing that certain traditional outlooks, interpersonal distrust, inequality, patron-client relations, and, perhaps most importantly, the expansion of the corporatist party system militated against the formation of a strong civil society.⁴ Now after over a decade of a bloody drug war, there is considerable doubt about its very existence.⁵

In one of the most damning appreciations, Jorge Castañeda pulls together historical works, cultural caricatures, and the old joke about Mexican crabs pulling each other back into the pot to conclude that “civil society . . . is so disorganized and is to such a degree impotent because Mexican citizens have never believed that collective action can effect change on a grand scale, neither in their colonias, nor in their children’s schools, nor in the local health centers.”⁶ (A cynic might speculate that this may be true for Castañeda’s walled mansions and private colleges, but it is not so as soon as you step outside the Lomas de Chapultepec.)

Just as the Lomas de Chapultepec do not represent Mexico, so Castañeda does not represent most Mexicanists. And over the past three decades, academics have started to pick apart some of these assertions. Sociologist Carlos Forment has argued that it was Mexico’s strong “associative life,” civic Catholicism, and vibrant public sphere that generated and shaped its early nineteenth-century democracy.⁷ Recent histories of religious organizations, electoral politics, public spaces, and the printing press have only strengthened

4. Octavio Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude* (London: Penguin, 1990); Oscar Lewis, *The Children of Sánchez: Autobiography of a Mexican Family* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1961); Pablo González Casanova, *Democracy in Mexico*, trans. Danielle Salti (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970); Sylvia Ann Hewlett and Richard S Weinert, *Brazil and Mexico: Patterns in Late Development* (Washington, DC: Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1982); David Hodges and Daniel Ross Gandy, *Mexico 1910–1982: Reform or Revolution?* (London: Zed Books, 1983). For a good rejoinder to these ideas, see Alan Knight, “Historical Continuities in Social Movements,” in *Popular Movements and Political Change in Mexico*, ed. Joe Foweraker and Ann Craig (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1990), 78–102.

5. See Ruben Aguilar, “La debilidad de la sociedad civil en México,” *Animal Político*, 2 July 2013, <https://www.animalpolitico.com/blogueros-lo-que-quiso-decir/2013/07/02/la-debilidad-de-la-sociedad-civil-en-mexico/>.

6. Jorge Castañeda, *Mañana o pasado: El misterio de los mexicanos* (Mexico City: Vintage, 2011), 328.

7. Carlos A. Forment, *Democracy in Latin America 1760–1900*. vol. 1, *Civic Selfhood and Public Life in Mexico and Peru* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 29.

his case.⁸ New cultural historians have used a revised version of Antonio Gramsci's ideas on hegemony to argue that bottom-up negotiations over the postrevolutionary cultural projects did initially lead to the "growth and deepening of civil society."⁹ But even these appreciations of civil society are tinged with disappointment. Nineteenth-century democracy ended with the Porfirian dictatorship. Cultural negotiations produced the eventual fusing of political and civil society and the creation of a national hegemonic system.¹⁰

On a handful of occasions, reformers have gazed down on Mexico's masses and perceived the green shoots of civil society stirring. In the wake of the 1985 earthquake, amidst the indigenous movements of the 1990s, and in the run up to the 2000 presidential election, commentators and scholars declared that civil society had finally arrived. (Carlos Monsiváis wrote ironically that the quake had "produced a new thing called 'civil society.'"¹¹) Depending on one's political viewpoint, modern capitalism, bottom-up organizing, a free press, the decline of the ruling party, and the influence of the United States combined in one way or another to generate a bewildering array of cross-class networks and organizations. These, in turn, pushed politics in new antihierarchical, liberating, and democratic directions.¹²

8. E.g., Silvia Marina Arrom, *Volunteering for a Cause: Gender, Faith, and Charity in Mexico from the Reform to the Revolution* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2016); Silvia Marina Arrom, "Las Señoras de la Caridad: Pioneras olvidadas de la asistencia social en México, 1863–1910," *Historia Mexicana* 226 (2007): 445–90; Paul Ramírez, "Enlightened Publics for Public Health: Assessing Disease in Colonial Mexico," *Endeavour* 37, no. 1 (March 2013): 3–12; Pablo Piccato, "The Public Sphere and Liberalism in Mexico: From the Mid-Nineteenth Century to the 1930s," in *Oxford Research Encyclopedias: Latin American History*, ed. William H. Beezley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), Oxford Research Encyclopedias subscription; Guadalupe Curiel Defossé and Belem Clark de Lara, eds., *Aproximaciones a una historia intelectual: Revistas y asociaciones literarias mexicanas del siglo XIX* (Mexico City: UNAM, 2016); Isnardo Santos, *Para una historia de las asociaciones en México (siglos XVIII–XX)* (Mexico City: Palabra de Clío, 2014); Rosalina Ríos Zúñiga, "Contención del movimiento: Prensa y asociaciones cívicas en Zacatecas, 1824–1833," *Historia Mexicana* 52, no. 1 (2002): 103–61.

9. Mary Kay Vaughan, *Cultural Politics in Revolution: Teachers, Peasants, and Schools in Mexico, 1930–1940* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1997), 190.

10. E.g., Vaughan, 190–202; Elsie Rockwell, "Schools of the Revolution: Enacting and Contesting State Forms in Tlaxcala," in *Everyday Forms of State Formation: Revolution and the Negotiation of Rule in Mexico*, ed. Gilbert Joseph and Daniel Nugent (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), 170–208.

11. Carlos Monsiváis, "El día del derrumbe y las semanas de la comunidad (De noticieros y de crónicas)," *Cuadernos Políticos* 45 (January–March 1986): 11–24.

12. Guillermo de la Peña, "Civil Society and Popular Resistance: Mexico at the End of the Twentieth Century," in *Cycles of Conflict, Centuries of Change: Crisis, Reform, and Revolution in Mexico*, ed. Elisa Servín, Leticia Reina, and John Tutino

In one of the most cogent and influential analyses, Leonardo Avritzer described how different traditions of authoritarianism, mobilization, and economic liberalization generated very different patterns of civil society in different Latin American countries.¹³ In Mexico, nearly half a million Alianza Cívica members played crucial roles in monitoring and reporting PRI electoral fraud; they made sure that the 2000 presidential elections did not turn out like those of 1988.¹⁴

Yet, even these pronouncements were short-lived. The disappointing neoliberalism of Vicente Fox's term, the violence of Felipe Calderón's, and the return of an even more sclerotic and repressive PRI under Enrique Peña Nieto merged to dampen—if not kill off—both academic and popular usage of the expression, except in plaintive or nostalgic terms.¹⁵ Jon Schefner, who spent twenty years observing organizations in the poorer barrios of urban Guadalajara, argued that civil society was so “differentiated by social, economic, political power manifested in the social hierarchies pertinent to the particular society under examination” that it was almost entirely meaningless; in fact, he titled his book, *The Illusion of Civil Society*.¹⁶

No doubt, such critiques, especially when based on long-term research in specific regions, have considerable value. The contributors

(Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 305–45; Chappell Lawson, *Building the Fourth Estate: Democratization and the Rise of a Free Press in Mexico* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Jacqueline Butcher, *Mexican Solidarity: Citizen Participation and Volunteering* (New York: Springer, 2010); Gerardo Otero, ed., *Mexico in Transition: Neoliberal Globalism, the State, and Civil Society* (London: Zed Books, 2004); Philip Oxhorn, *Sustaining Civil Society: Economic Change, Democracy, and the Social Construction of Citizenship in Latin America* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2011); R. Feinberg, C. Waisman, and L. Zamosc, eds., *Civil Society and Democracy in Latin America* (London: Palgrave, 2006); Jean Cohen and Andrew Arato, *Sociedad civil y teoría política* (Mexico City: FCE, 2000); Leonardo Avritzer, *Democracy and Public Space in Latin America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002); Joe Foweraker and Ann L. Craig, eds., *Popular Movements and Political Change in Mexico* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1990).

13. Avritzer, *Democracy and Public Space*.

14. Avritzer, 126–28.

15. For the continuing importance of civil society in Mexico, see María Elena Morera and Sonia Quintana, “AMLO y la sociedad civil: Una relación compleja,” *Animal Político*, 7 March 2019, <https://www.animalpolitico.com/el-blog-de-causa-encomun/amlo-y-la-sociedad-civil-una-relacion-compleja/>.

16. Jon Shefner, *The Illusion of Civil Society: Democratization and Community Mobilization in Low Income Mexico* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2008). Recently, Trevor Stack and Salvador Maldonado have been researching the importance of civil society also in the poorer areas of the center west. They initially posited that civil-society organizations acted as crucial mediators between society and organized crime. It will be interesting to see how their research pans out.

to this volume do not view twentieth-century Mexico as some kind of Tocquevillian utopia. Nor do we view the term “civil society” as what Jacques M. Chevalier and Daniel Buckles (in a rather well-hidden note) term an “amorphous lifeworld, a conceptual glory-hole that accommodates an undetermined and pluralistic sphere outside of politics and economics.”¹⁷

This special issue comprises five articles, which broadly cover the period of *dictablanda* Mexico from the 1930s through to the 1960s. The first article, however, by Paul Gillingham, serves as a theoretical and historical introduction. It is a broad-ranging analysis of citizenship, civil society, and the public sphere in Latin America as a whole. Gillingham looks at how these imported concepts both meshed with and clashed with existing social and racial hierarchies, forms of political organization, and violence. In doing so, he discovers that Latin Americans mobilized all three concepts at the service of electoral power, autonomy, and economic distribution. The second article, by Ben Fallaw, examines the state’s harassment of the *Diario de Yucatán* and the deliberate manipulation of liberal notions of civil society. The third article, by David Tamayo, looks at how Monterrey’s business organizations mobilized conservatives against state forces. The fourth article, by Elizabeth Villa, focuses on the horizontal links developed by Tijuana’s professional and neighborhood organizations. Finally, Benjamin T. Smith’s article recounts how Chihuahua City’s press and citizens groups worked together to search for justice and eventually lever an unpopular governor from power.

If there is a lacuna in this special issue, it is the lack of research on civil society in rural areas of *dictablanda* Mexico. Certainly, as Alan Knight argues, the closed corporate community with its relative egalitarian social structure, strong horizontal ties, and village organizations, from *cofradías* to school boards to *ejido* juntas, did share certain similarities with traditional definitions of civil society.¹⁸ Local formulations of the village, *el pueblo*, and civil society overlapped.¹⁹ Partido Acción Nacional (PAN) voting villages in the Mixteca Baja often described themselves as representing “independent civil society” (as

17. Jacques M. Chevalier and Daniel Buckles, *A Land without Gods: Process, Theory, Maldevelopment and the Mexican Nabuas* (Atlantic Heights, NJ: Zed Books, 1995), 68n7.

18. Alan Knight, “The Weight of the State in Modern Mexico,” in *Studies in the Formation of the Nation-State in Latin American*, ed. James Dunkerley (London: ILAS, 2002), 212–53.

19. For the debates over the definition of *el pueblo*, see Paul Eiss, *In the Name of el pueblo: Place, Community, and the Politics of History in Yucatán* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

opposed to the PRI-voting state shills).²⁰ Such notions clearly harked back to the civic nineteenth-century Catholicism that Forment describes. It was still being taught in schools over a century later.

Yet there are also problems with rolling ideas of civil society out to rural Mexico. It blurs social, political, and age-based hierarchies. It assumes a rather static vision of Mexican villages as closed corporate communities. It is a vision that historians and anthropologists are currently busy upending.²¹ And it plays down the ways in which the PRI state, through co-option and the targeted use of violence, did start to dominate certain parts of rural Mexico.²²

Instead, the four case studies presented here deal with provincial cities; each examines the development of civil society in a different context. Yet there are certain common assertions and themes that run through them. Perhaps the most important is that previous dismissals of the scope, force, and import of civil society in Mexico have, at least partially, been based on romanticized appreciations of civil society in the United States and Europe, simplified cultural reifications (in particular the alleged individualism of Mexicans), and the limited observation of Mexico City and/or miscalculations of the co-optive power of the state.²³ Though more recent historical appreciations of the limits of civil society have avoided some of these pitfalls, they have tended to be based on official documents, which, by their very nature, overestimate state influence.²⁴

20. Antonio Barragan to Secretaría de Gobernación, 3 May 1952, 2.082 (18) 3820, Archivo General de la Nación, Dirección General de Gobierno.

21. For the old definitions of the closed corporate community, see Eric Wolf, "Closed Corporate Peasant Communities in Mesoamerica and Central Java," *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* 13 (1957): 1–18; Eric Wolf, "Aspects of Group Relations in a Complex Society: Mexico," *American Anthropologist* 58, no. 5 (October 1956): 1065–78; Eric Wolf, *Sons of the Shaking Earth* (Chicago: Chicago University, 1959), 202–32. For a contemporary critique, see John Chance, "Mesoamerica's Ethnographic Past," *Ethnohistory* 43, no. 3 (1996): 391–92. It should be noted that Eric Wolf also sought to reform his earlier model; Eric Wolf, "The Vicissitudes of the Closed Corporate Peasant Community," *American Ethnologist* 13 (1986): 325–29.

22. Gladys McCormick, *The Logic of Compromise in Mexico: How the Countryside was Key to the Emergence of Authoritarianism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016); Alexander Aviña, *Specters of Revolution: Peasant Guerillas in the Cold War Mexican Countryside* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Tanalis Padilla, *Rural Resistance in the Land of Zapata: The Jaramillista Movement and the Myth of the Pax Priista, 1940–1962* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).

23. For the weakness of the PRI state, see Knight, "Weight of the State," 212–53.

24. For the dangers of what Paul Gillingham and I have termed "the DFSization of Mexican history," see Benjamin T. Smith and Paul Gillingham, introduction to *Dictablanda: Politics, Work, and Culture in Mexico, 1938–1968*, ed. Benjamin T. Smith and Paul Gillingham (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 13.

Furthermore, by looking beyond state documents and at regions infrequently studied by historians and social scientists, such as provincial cities, it is possible to observe Mexican civil society.²⁵ It occurs both in the Tocquevillian sense, as a series of relatively autonomous, horizontally structured organizations and networks (like the sports associations, leisure clubs, and infrastructure boards described by Josefina Elizabeth Villa Pérez and like the church groups, charity organizations, and business organizations laid out by David Tamayo), and in the Habermasian sense, as independent, if geographically limited, public spheres (like that of Mérida described by Ben Fallaw).²⁶

These localized iterations of civil society undoubtedly always encountered and grappled with internal pressures, including assumed hierarchies, traditions, and clientelist relations, and external threats from capitalists, the state, or other powerful institutions, such as the church. Contrary to liberal cant, civil society is not an intrinsically pure, positive, or liberating phenomenon. It has always been warped by social and racial divisions and has produced moral panics, as well as rational debates.²⁷ In Mérida (as in the United States), an association between whiteness and civility narrowed and distorted what was deemed the public sphere. In Monterrey, class structures did the same to associational life. But, as more resolute Marxists might argue, civil society has not always been a bourgeois fiction, dreamed up to give the illusion of popular democratic input. In mid-century Chihuahua City and Tijuana, many more cross-class, gender-balanced, and, as a result, representative versions of civil society emerged; furthermore, they had genuine political force, from building pavements to kicking out governors.

Diverse local circumstances, then, meant that what social scientists term “civil society’s density and power” ebbed and flowed.²⁸ But, as historians, we are very aware that these ebbs and flows almost never followed a distinct teleology of Gramscian hegemony or democratization, nor did they match up to traditional appreciations

25. For the minimal study of provincial cities (relative, at least, to Mexico City and the countryside), see Carlos Lira Vasquez and Ariel Rodríguez Kuri, eds., *Ciudades mexicanas del siglo XX: Siete estudios históricos* (Mexico City: Colegio de México, 2009).

26. Michael Edwards, *Civil Society* (Malden, MA: Polity, 2004).

27. For moral panics and civil society, see Stuart Hall et al., *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order* (London: MacMillan, 1978).

28. Carlos Waisman, “Autonomy, Self-Regulation and Democracy: Tocquevillian-Gellnerian Perspectives on Civil Society and the Bifurcated State in Latin America,” in Feinberg, Waisman, and Zamosc, *Civil Society and Democracy*, 17–34.

of the rise and fall of Mexican civil society, which tend to focus on Mexico City and stress the 1985 earthquake as a key point of inflection. In fact, these articles suggest that at times (such as the 1910s, 1930s, or, one might speculate, the particularly violent stage of Cold War conflict in the 1970s) or places (like Mérida, Monterrey, San Cristóbal de las Casas, or even Mexico City) of extreme social or political division, civil society was a narrow, relatively elite phenomenon. Yet even at these times, those outside the *haute bourgeoisie* could occasionally reformulate and refashion it to encompass a more representative cross section of society. But in other times (such as the 1940s–1960s and the 1980s–2000s) and many places (like the northern boom towns or the state capitals), it was much more equitable, extensive, and politically viable.

Such assertions also lead to another finding. All of the articles—but particularly Ben Fallaw’s, David Tamayo’s, and Benjamin T. Smith’s—examine the conflicts between -emic and -etic definitions of civil society. Who defined what civil society was? Was it the state-backed, often class-based groups, or was it the more organic but perhaps less widely representative nonstate organizations? It seems that conflicts over the nature, shape, and representativeness of civil society are not a recent phenomenon or a product of AMLO’s rather narrow definition. They have been sites of social and political contests since the Revolution.

These articles also focus on the crucial role played by women in these civil organizations. During the Second World War, they were Tijuana’s volunteer nurses and the fundraisers for the Comités de Defensa Civil. In Chihuahua City, they comprised most of the members of the Comité Pro-Justicia y los Derechos de Ciudadanos (CPJDC), whipped up the crowds at meetings, and extended the organization’s ambit into charity work. In fact, it often appears that civil-society work was the bridge for many mid-century Mexican women to enter the still rather closed patriarchal world of formal electoral politics. It is telling that the few women who did manage to break through into municipal or state politics before the 1970s cut their teeth (and showed their organizing capacity) within these organizations.²⁹

29. María Teresa Fernández Aceves, “Advocate or *cacica*? Guadalupe Urzúa Flores: Modernizer and Peasant Political Leader in Jalisco,” in Paul Gillingham and Benjamin T. Smith, eds., *Dictablanda: Politics, Work and Culture in Mexico, 1938–1968* (Durham: Duke University, 2014), 236–54; Benjamin T. Smith, “Who Governed? Grassroots Politics in 1960s Mexico,” *Past & Present* (November 2014): 238–39.

Finally, all of the articles assert that by taking this relatively open and critical attitude to civil society, it is possible to use it as a middle-range theory to understand both social processes within Mexican communities and the relationship between these processes and more formal politics. In particular, this attitude helps to explain the relative political effervescence of mid-century Mexican politics, the very gradual and faltering efforts of the PRI to secure urban support, and the way in which conflicts in provincial cities were often solved by some kind of consensus rather than by recourse to force.