who blended old positivist biological tropes with new Freudian thinking, and Roberto ‘el Güero’ Batillas, the pistol-wearing tough guy pictured on the front cover of the book. Outside these entertaining portraits, Piccato cleverly explains how these actors as well as their audiences wove together reality and fiction to create mid-century Mexico’s crime milieu. As he argues, using Jorge Luis Borges’s insight, infamy was a ‘surface of images’ but one which Mexican citizens were forced to engage with on a daily basis.

The final section examines some of the results of this interaction, in particular the rise of Mexican crime fiction. Here, he dissects some of the well-known texts like Rudolfo Usigli’s Ensayo de un crimen (América, 1944), an obvious and powerful influence on Piccato’s own work, and Rafael Bernal’s El complot mongol (Joaquín Mortiz, 1969), as well as less celebrated works like the serialised La Prensa crime series by the mysterious Leo d’Olmo, who emerges as a kind of B Movie B. Traven.

Taken together, Piccato’s new book is an extraordinary and important work. In fact, in my opinion it is the most important work on Mexico’s recent history since Sergio Aguayo’s La Charola: Una historia de los servicios de inteligencia en México (Grajalbo, 2001). By placing crime, impunity, truth and justice at the forefront of relations between state and society, he redefines the way we should look at twentieth-century Mexican history. Post-revolutionary Mexico was not only the site for clashes over land, workers’ rights and the cultural mosaic of nationalism, but also the place for an increasingly violent and desperate struggle over citizens’ access to justice. This was played out not only on the streets with thuggish cops and intimidating hitmen, but also in the public sphere in the pages of Mexico’s tabloids and crime magazines. This struggle, in turn, extended into debates over land, workers’ rights and culture as well as citizenship, gender, politics and the role of journalism. I have no doubt that historians will be quoting, debating, and working off this book for years to come. It also deserves to bridge disciplines and should influence the literary critics, political scientists and sociologists of Latin America.

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One of the challenges of writing the history of social movements in Latin America originates in the elusiveness of historical actors themselves, and in the continuous labour of historians to assess the adequacy of the theories that make them and their contexts legible. In this set of essays, Carlos Illades engages in such a task by examining different cycles of mobilisation, rebellion and protest in modern Mexico, and the ways in which popular movements challenged prevailing structures of domination, unveiling the fault lines of modern state formation. In Chapter 1, Illades provides a brief review of historiographic and sociological contributions to the study of social movements, highlighting those that centred on the experiential dimensions of collective action; the logic of collective violence; and the relationship of contention that protestors, rebels and rioters establish with structures of power. In setting up this dialogue between history and theory, Illades aims to scrutinise the link between popular mobilisation and state repression; the non-linear relation between protest and democratisation; and the
historical conditions in which mobilisation could result in de-democratisation and authoritarian re-entrenchment.

Tackling the movements of craftsmen and peasants from the mid-nineteenth century to the unfolding of the Mexican Revolution, Chapters 2 and 3 show how these popular actors interpreted and re-appropriated socialist and anarchist ideas to pose challenges to the established order. Illades sheds light on the connections (although often tenuous ones) between the emergence of mutualist and socialist collectives, the early efforts to unionise the urban working classes, and the localised impacts of socialism in regional agrarian rebellions against the abuses of landowners and authorities. Along with their broader calls to refound the social pact, some of these movements made very concrete demands to restore communal property, promote economic citizenship via credit unions, and strengthen municipal autonomy. For the author, these claims reveal the radical challenge that these movements posed to the Porfiriato, and, later, to the post-revolutionary regime. His argument is not one of pure agency of popular actors or even one of continuous radical mobilisation. Instead, he notes the structural and contextual constraints faced by the protagonists of these rebellions and protest movements, their episodic eruption and recurrent fragmentation and their isolation, as well as the remarkable historical resilience of their claims and repertoires of protest.

Chapters 4 and 5 refer to two distinct ways in which the accumulated legacies of mobilisation and the collective memories of the protagonists framed their repertoires of violence (rioting, land occupations, peasant guerrilla warfare) by endowing them with different meanings. The mob violence against Spanish immigrants during the 1915 food riots in Mexico City appears, on the surface, as an isolated episode of xenophobic nationalism in the heat of the Mexican Revolution. Yet, Illades’s brief analysis portrays the events as a symptom of the political void caused by civil war, and as a means to redress social injustice from below by attacking (and essentially scapegoating) a group that, in the popular imaginary, appeared as historically antithetical to national aims. While Illades sees this ‘outburst’ of xenophobic violence as ‘irrational’ and destructive, in contrast he treats the emergence of guerrilla warfare in mid-twentieth century Guerrero as the outcome of accumulated cycles of mobilisation and repression. The central question in these two cases is that of the context and rationale of violence; that is, in the case of Guerrero, the long-term conditions allowing collective actors to undertake forms of ‘coordinated destruction’ which in turn they framed as self-defence.

The author stresses the weight of Guerrero’s history of agrarian revolt against cacique power in shaping the contemporary cycle of mobilisation, repression and self-defence. Indeed, rural autodefensas (and the idea of violence as self-defence) have been central to the repertoire of social movements that have rationalised them as a means to protect communities, restore lost rights, and generate a new democratic order from below. Yet, Illades suggests, the effectiveness of more contemporary forms of autodefensas as catalysts for sustained social mobilisation and transformation have found limits in the growing presence of organised crime as a purveyor of de-centralised repressive violence, sustained by state corruption and fed by the expansion of the global drug trade.

The three remaining chapters comprise an attempt to make sense of a more recent but equally tumultuous arc of mobilisation, from the support for the Zapatista rebellion of 1994 to the post-electoral conflict of 2006 and the movement to protest the disappearance of the 43 students of Ayotzinapa in 2014, amongst others. Piecing together this contemporary Mexican puzzle, Illades provides a mixed assessment, in
which he praises the success of public protest in bringing human rights, transparency and media plurality into the claims of social movements, while lamenting (without necessarily explaining) the absence of sustained political forms following these periods of high mobilisation. This loss of momentum has, in his view, led to greater system resilience and to the gradual ‘de-democratisation’ of Mexican politics. His critique of neo-anarchism and ‘black bloc’ tactics as a symptom of youth ‘antipoliticism’ dwells on this concern about de-democratisation and depolitisisation, which manifests, in those cases, through forms of violence that he qualifies as nihilistic, disconnected from prior struggles, and pursuing violence as an ends itself. Without a conclusion that returns the analysis to the theoretical and historiographical ‘big picture’ that connects all of these episodes, this last chapter is anticlimactic, and raises a paradox pertaining to the author’s own normative and interpretive position. That is, whether it is possible, from the perspective of a social historian with no historical distance, to draw a stark distinction between forms of popular violence endowed with the mantle of ‘the moral economy of the crowd’; and those that the author deems as irrational, destructive, meaningless and apolitical. The book leaves other unresolved questions about the place of violence (if any) in the current cycle of Mexican discontent; about the role of the state, beyond its repressive dimension, in overcoming the cycles of violence; and the extent to which the internationalisation of new movements (e.g. the neo-anarchists) poses a challenge for analyses focused on the nation-state as actor and interlocutor. All in all, and despite a translation that undermines the text’s analytical and stylistic clarity, this book pieces together emblematic fragments of Mexican social history to shed light on their structural continuities (in the repertoires of violence, forms of domination and cycles of contestation), and succeeds in posing important historical and political questions that may ultimately pertain to the present and future of social movements in and beyond Mexico.

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Luis Herran Avila


Beauty, Virtue, Power, and Success in Venezuela 1850–2015 takes on an important and under-researched theme, both within studies of Venezuela and Latin American gender studies. This book, though, requires more evidence to illustrate the comparative importance of female beauty and body aesthetics in Venezuela vis-à-vis other countries. More importantly, instead of historical research, the book uses theories from cultural and postcolonial studies and ideas from psychology and evolutionary biology to interpret largely biographical sources drawn from literature and the media. It relies on the ideas of two thinkers – the ‘evolutionary psychologist’ Nancy Etcoff and cultural theorist/philosopher Pierre Bourdieu – to frame the analysis. However, only one reference for each is found in the bibliography and the result of privileging cultural and postcolonial theory over historical method is a largely ahistorical and delocalised perspective. Furthermore, the structure of the book – put together as a series of separate essays (in which the period 1950–80 is not specifically covered) – works against the development of a concise historical argument. The book does make some potentially insightful connections to Venezuela’s modern history, politics and relations of gender, class, race and national identity (for example, universal suffrage was first granted in