

Cardenismo: Juggernaut or Jalopy?*

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Historians all agree that the Cárdenas presidency was a crucial period in the development of twentieth-century Mexico. They would not agree as to the reasons for its importance.¹ The range of interpretations is so wide and, at times, so nuanced, that it is risky to try to summarise the underlying disagreements. However, there are certain key differences which can be emphasised; and I shall begin this article with a quick review of what I consider those key differences to be.

Four interrelated questions are of salient importance:

(1) how radical was the Cardenista regime, in terms of its *goals and policies* – in other words, how far did it break with precedent and seek to transform Mexican society?

(2) to what extent was policy conceived on high and dictated to those below (or, alternatively, conceived in Mexico City and dictated to those in the provinces), rather than being determined by either popular ('bottom-up') or provincial ('periphery-in') pressures? In other words, how democratic, as against authoritarian, was Cardenismo?²

(3) how powerful were the Cardenista regime and movement: i.e. how great was their capacity to achieve their goals, especially in the face of resistance?

(4) hence, finally, how radical was the Cardenista regime in terms of its *practical accomplishments* – in other words, how far did it implement (rather than simply espouse) radical changes? What was its durable legacy?

A review of the literature, both contemporary and more recent, suggests that analyses can be roughly categorised according to the answers

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¹ Samuel León, 'Cárdenas en el poder (I)', in Javier Garcíadiego et al., *Evolución del estado mexicano: Reestructuración, 1910–1940* (Mexico, 1986), p. 219.

² By 'democratic' I do not necessarily mean 'liberal-democratic' (as I make clear later in the article). 'Democratic' simply implies a genuine measure of popular representation – which may take varied forms. 'Authoritarian' means the absence of popular representation: decision-making from the top.

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they give to these four questions: What did the state purpose? Whom did the state represent? How strong was the state? And what was the long term outcome of state policy? Questions two and three demand an analysis of the revolutionary state: a contentious subject, productive of many conflicting opinions. Questions one and four raise the old problem – familiar to all historians – of continuity versus change. Was Cardenismo – in intent and practice – a radical transforming movement/project/regime? Or did it represent more of the same, a continuation, with certain limited adjustments, of postrevolutionary (maybe even Porfirian) policy?

Of course, such interpretative differences are best seen as inhabiting continua, rather than separate boxes. Often, the differences are ones of emphasis – and non-quantifiable emphasis – rather than stark polarity. However, they cannot be glossed over. The official PRIísta view (for what it is worth) accommodates Cárdenas within the teleological progress of the Mexican Revolution: it stresses continuity and the cumulative contributions of successive administrations to the onward march of the Mexican Revolution. Thus, somewhat to the embarrassment of today's PRI, as it confronts a powerful neo-Cardenista challenge, Cardenista icons litter the political landscape, both literally and figuratively. A bronze profile of Lázaro Cárdenas stands guard at the portals of Los Pinos. It should be noted that this official emphasis on continuity tends to accompany a stated belief in the democratic and popular character of Cardenismo, and the Revolution as a whole. In response to question two, apologists of the party would tend to stress the genuinely popular character of Cardenismo.

The mirror image of the official view is that propounded by several scholars (who, tentatively, might be labelled 'revisionist').³ They, too, stress the continuity of Cardenismo, but from a critical standpoint. Two kinds of revisionism are apparent. One, inclining to a loosely Marxist viewpoint, conceives of the institutional revolution as an engine of capitalist development and capital accumulation. At least since the defeat of the popular movements of 1910–15, successive regimes have represented the interests of the bourgeoisie: either – as an 'agency' or 'instrumentalist' theory of the state would imply – by enacting the political will of the bourgeoisie; or, given a measure of state autonomy, by taking the lead in promoting bourgeois interests – even, in some

³ 'Revisionist' is *not* a term of abuse and has *nothing* to do with Eduard Bernstein. It denotes a recent current of historical interpretation which, reacting against orthodox views of the Mexican Revolution, tends to stress the latter's top-down, elitist, state-building, anti-popular tendencies. Experts may differ as to what 'revisionism' precisely is; but most believe in its existence and are happy to use the term, sometimes even applying it to themselves.

versions, by nurturing the infant bourgeoisie itself.⁴ The Cárdenas regime is no exception. According to this view, its policies served to co-opt popular movements, to subordinate them to the state, and to deepen the domestic market to the advantage of capital.⁵ Some historians would stress that these policies were consciously and purposively adopted.⁶ Others address the outcome, without necessarily imputing intention: Warman sees the late 1930s as the time when a capitalist path of development was definitively adopted; Haber argues that Mexican business flourished during the 1930s and benefited significantly from government policy; Garrido sees the Cardenista PNR as sustaining 'the project of a national bourgeoisie'.⁷

The second variant of the revisionist continuity thesis focuses on the state (and may or may not involve a class analysis). Given its focus, we may refer to this as a statist interpretation, sometimes Marxist, sometimes non-Marxist. Arnaldo Córdova emphasises the rise of the state while remaining within the Marxist camp (indeed, he is at pains to defend his Marxist orthodoxy against supposed imputations of deviation). For him, Cardenismo represents the successful culmination of the revolutionary *política de masas*; the subordination of popular classes to the mighty revolutionary state.⁸ Clearly, this view consorts closely with Anguiano's: the difference, in my judgement, resides in the relative emphasis given to the state and its capacity for autonomous action. While the first perspective sees the state acting as the protagonist of capital, which supplies the *raison d'être* of state policy, statist interpretations assume a considerable autonomy for the state (hence they often introduce the woolly concept of Bonapartism).⁹ We may see these differences within the

⁴ See the discussion in Nora Hamilton, *The Limits of State Autonomy: Post-Revolutionary Mexico* (Princeton, 1982), ch. 1.

⁵ The most cogent statement of this view is Arturo Anguiano, *El Estado y la política obrera del cardenismo*, 9th edn. (Mexico, 1984).

⁶ 'Cárdenas' supporters... thought mainly in terms of modernizing the free enterprise capitalist system in order to better insure its survival': Albert L. Michaels and Marvin Bernstein, 'The Modernization of the Old Order: Organization and Periodization of Twentieth-Century Mexican History', in James C. Wilkie, Michael C. Meyer and Edna Monzón de Wilkie (eds.), *Contemporary Mexico* (Berkeley, 1976), p. 701; see also Anguiano, *El Estado*, pp. 42–5, 65, 79–80; Hamilton, *Limits of State Autonomy*, pp. 139–40; and Heather Fowler Salamini, *Agrarian Radicalism in Veracruz, 1920–38* (Lincoln, 1978), pp. 112–13.

⁷ Arturo Warman, *Y venimos a contradecir: los campesinos de Morelos y el estado nacional* (Mexico, 1976), p. 195; Stephen R. Haber, *Industry and Underdevelopment: The Industrialization of Mexico, 1890–1940* (Stanford, 1989), ch. 10; Luis Javier Garrido, *El partido de la Revolución institucionalizada* (Mexico, 1986), p. 294.

⁸ Arnaldo Córdova, *La política de masas del cardenismo*, 2nd edn. (Mexico, 1976).

⁹ Alan Knight, 'The Mexican Revolution: Bourgeois? Nationalist? Or just a "Great Rebellion"?', *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, vol. 4, no. 2 (1985), pp. 4–5, for some doubts about Bonapartism.

Marxist historiography of Mexico as reflecting broader theoretical differences which have agitated (and enriched) Marxist theory more generally.¹⁰

However, in Mexican as in other historiographies, the statist approach is by no means a Marxist monopoly. Concern for 'bringing the state back in' cuts across theoretical (Marxist/non-Marxist) boundaries.¹¹ In the Mexican case, plenty of non-Marxist scholars (I hesitate to call them 'bourgeois', since, in one sense, they are no more 'bourgeois' than their Marxist counterparts) have seen the rise of the state as the hallmark of modern Mexican history and have, in consequence, stressed the continuity of the state-building process throughout the postrevolutionary period (and, even, through the Porfirian period too).¹² For them, Cárdenas carries on the work of Calles, Obregón, and maybe even Díaz; continuity is stressed over rupture. In addition, these scholars emphasise the success of this process. The revolutionary state is depicted as a burgeoning Leviathan, which progressively subordinates civil society to its imperious will. This view is apparent in many of the local and regional studies which have deepened our knowledge of Mexican history, as well as in synthetic studies of the postrevolutionary regime.¹³ It follows from this that the Cárdenas administration not only fits snugly within a long-term sequence of state-building governments, but also exemplifies – perhaps *par excellence* – a top-down process of centralisation, of cultural imposition, of 'empowerment' of the state, rather than of the people.¹⁴ Cardenismo 'consolidates and perfects' the prevailing political system; and Cárdenas himself assumes an autocratic role, 'amo y señor de México', less St Francis than a wily Machiavellian fox (or, worse, *un zorro con sayal franciscano*).¹⁵ In response to questions two and three (what was the character of the Cardenista state and how powerful was it?) these scholars would reply 'authoritarian' and 'very'. For them – in terms of the title of this article – Cardenismo was a juggernaut, driven by a determined driver.

¹⁰ John Holloway and Sol Picciotto, *State and Capital: A Marxist Debate* (London, 1978), is a useful collection.

¹¹ Peter Evans et al. (eds.), *Bringing the State Back In* (Cambridge, 1985).

¹² Knight, 'The Mexican Revolution', p. 11; 'Presentación', in Garcíadiego et al., *Evolución del Estado Mexicano*, p. 11.

¹³ Jean Meyer, *La Revolución Mexicana, 1910–40* (Barcelona, 1973).

¹⁴ Marjorie Becker, 'Lázaro Cárdenas, cultural cartographers, and the limits of everyday resistance in Michoacán, 1934–40', paper given at the 46th International Conference of Americanistas, Amsterdam, 1988; Enrique Krauze, *General misionero: Lázaro Cárdenas* (Mexico, 1987), pp. 39, 147, terms Cárdenas 'an implacable manipulator of the masses' who, in the words of Rubén Salazar Mallén (1939) presided over a 'new Porfirismo'.

¹⁵ Anguiano, *El Estado*, p. 65; Tomás Martínez Saldaña, 'Formación y transformación de una oligarquía: el caso de Arandas, Jalisco', in Martínez Saldaña and Leticia Gándara Mendoza, *Política y sociedad en México: el caso de los Altos de Jalisco* (Mexico, 1976), p. 109; Krauze, *General misionero*, p. 87.

Against these views, with their different emphases but common stress on continuity, stands a contrary opinion which argues the distinctiveness of Cardenismo, its radical content, its transforming goals (and, perhaps, accomplishments). Again, it is worth repeating that these opinions are to be found scattered across a broad continuum; and detailed debate would involve considerations of definition (what was Cardenismo, who were the Cardenistas?), of place (which states or regions are we reviewing?), and of time (do we stress the more radical and confident Cardenismo of 1936–8, or the more cautious and diffident Cardenismo of post-1938?). But it cannot, I think, be denied that, against the arguments for continuity and sameness which the previously cited authorities sustain, some historians have stressed discontinuity, the radicalism and ‘specificity’ of Cardenismo: David Raby, Fernando Benítez, Nora Hamilton, Anatol Shulgovski and Tzvi Medin (for whom Cardenismo is the ‘negation’ of Callismo).¹⁶ Adolfo Gilly, who argued that the popular revolution of 1910–17 had been ‘interrupted’ with the defeat of Villa and Zapata and the installation of a petty-bourgeois Bonapartist regime, sees (proto-) Cardenismo as a genuinely radical second wave, and the neo-Cardenismo of today as a continuation of these popular and radical currents.¹⁷

In short, the literature on Cardenismo suggests some significant differences of opinion, which in turn imply contrasting interpretations of the revolution. The differences seem to resolve around the linked questions of: (1) continuity as against rupture at the level of policy; (2) the relationship of the state to civil society; (3) the power of the state; and (4) continuity as against rupture at the level of durable accomplishments. It is also worth recalling that these questions are hardly new. At the time, Cardenismo elicited strong opinions, for and against. There were Catholic and liberal critics who saw Cárdenas as fitting within the (regrettable) trajectory of the Revolution: their views were the mirror-image of the official line.¹⁸ Prior to 1935, too, the Mexican Communist Party refused to make a distinction between Calles and Cárdenas; after 1938 the Party’s

¹⁶ Liisa North and David Raby, ‘The Dynamics of Revolution and Counter-revolution: Mexico under Cárdenas, 1934–40’, *Latin American Research Unit Studies*, vol. 2, no. 1 (1977); Fernando Benítez, *Lázaro Cárdenas y la Revolución Mexicana*, t. III. *El cardenismo* (Mexico, 1978); Hamilton, *The Limits of State Autonomy*; Anatol Shulgovski, *México en la encrucijada de su historia* (Mexico, 1968); Tzvi Medin, *Ideología y praxis política de Lázaro Cárdenas*, 14th ed. (Mexico, 1987), p. 225.

¹⁷ Adolfo Gilly, *La revolución interrumpida* (Mexico, 1971), ch. 10; *Cartas a Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas* (Mexico, 1989). Gilly will shortly publish a major study of the Cárdenas government.

¹⁸ For Catholic critics, the Revolution went sour c. 1913; liberal/Maderista critics (e.g. Federico González Garza) might date the fall from grace similarly; others (e.g. Cabrera), would prefer c. 1920 or (e.g. Vasconcelos), c. 1924. The liberal opposition tended to receive reinforcements every time the political wheel turned and a new batch of political ‘outs’ was created: see n. 20 below.

alliance with the government gave rise to severe strains and internal divisions.¹⁹ Conversely, there were Cardenistas who believed that ‘their’ regime was the only one which delivered the goods to the people, literally and figuratively: before 1934 the Revolution had been stalled; after 1940 it was hi-jacked. Equally, there were revolutionary veterans who reversed this picture and branded Cárdenas as a traitor to the Revolution: one who – despite his protestations to the contrary – broke with indigenous revolutionary traditions, betrayed his mentor Calles, and embarked on a ‘Communist’ experiment. In this, the complaints of Cabrera, Cedillo, De la Huerta, Portes Gil and others of revolutionary pedigree chimed in with the laments of foreign observers.²⁰ Even the image of a revolutionary juggernaut is old: Jorge Prieto Laurens denounced the ‘hateful steamroller’ (*odiosa aplanadora*) of the PNR; Vasconcelos anticipated revisionist assertions of continuity (the events of 1935, he wrote, simply meant that the ‘mafia of the ill-omened Calles’ had simply fallen into the hands of the ‘ridiculous neophyte Cárdenas’) and of the absolute power of Cárdenas himself.²¹ Deliberately or not, many of today’s historians thus repeat the arguments of the 1930s: recent critiques of the Cardenista agrarian reform echo Cabrera (which is not to say that they are therefore right or wrong); Krauze’s liberal – one might almost say Vasconcelista – dissection of Cárdenas owes a good deal to Anguiano Equihua.²² As these examples suggest, recent debates within historiography build upon the

¹⁹ Barry Carr, ‘Crisis in Mexican Communism: The Extraordinary Congress of the Mexican Communist Party’, *Science and Society*, vol. 50, no. 4 and vol. 51, no. 1 (1987).

²⁰ Luis Cabrera, *Un ensayo comunista en México* (Mexico, 1937); Saturnino Cedillo, ‘Manifiesto a todo el campesinado de México’, 16 August 1938, denouncing ‘el Dictador Cárdenas’ and urging his audience not to allow ‘opportunist traitors to stain the honour of the true Mexican Revolution with COMMUNIST theory’: Archivo Francisco Múgica, Centro de Estudios de la Revolución Mexicana Lázaro Cárdenas, Jiquilpan (henceforth: AFM), vol. 106 doc. 365; De la Huerta’s criticism was more oblique (as befitted a recently returned exile): Murray, Mexico City, to Foreign Office, 29 Nov. 1935, FO 371/18707, A10789; *El Hombre Libre*, 11 Dec. 1935, on Portes Gil’s repudiation of the ‘exotic theory’ of Communism; Murray, Mexico City, to Foreign Office, 28 Nov. 1935, FO 371/18707, A10580, concurred that ‘the administration now in power is attempting to force advanced Marxian ideas down the throats of people in no way prepared to receive them’. Cabrera’s 1937 diatribe should be read in light of his longstanding job as legal retainer of the Tlahualilo Cotton Co., one of the chief victims of the 1936 Laguna reparto.

²¹ Jorge Prieto Laurens to Vicente Lombardo Toledano, 17 Sep. 1936, AFM 106/209; Vasconcelista manifesto, Nuevo León, 23 Aug. 1935, AFM 106/41; ‘Juicio del Maestro Don José Vasconcelos’ in Victoriano Anguiano Equihua, *Lázaro Cárdenas: su feudo y la política nacional* (Mexico, 1951), p. 11.

²² Krauze, *El general misionero*: Anguiano Equihua, *Lázaro Cárdenas*. For Cárdenas’s views on Anguiano Equihua – a ‘sterile chicken’, consumed by unsated political ambition – see his speech to the ex-alumnos of Escuelas Secundarias para Hijos de Trabajadores, 20 April 1957, in Lázaro Cárdenas, Archivo Particular, Archivo General de la Nación, Mexico City, rollo 11, part 2.

disputes of the 1930s. And, with the rise of neo-Cardenismo, the overlap between history and politics has palpably increased. Evaluating the character of (proto-) Cardenismo is, perhaps, all the more relevant, but all the more difficult and contentious.

In a brief article, no very complex evaluation can be attempted.²³ But I shall suggest four related points: that Cardenismo was, in terms of its objectives, a genuinely radical movement, which promised substantial change; that it also embodied substantial popular support, albeit this was not mediated through liberal democratic forms of representations; that, precisely because of its radicalism, it faced severe resistance, not only of an overt kind, but also of a more surreptitious, covert and successful kind, which severely curtailed its freedom of manoeuvre and led it to fudge, compromise, and retreat on several issues; and that, in consequence, its practical accomplishments were limited and even those which were attained during 1934–40 ran the risk of being subverted in later years by more conservative administrations. None of this, perhaps, is very new or surprising. But the implication of the argument is, I think, significant and certainly at odds with some of the opinions cited above: the implication is that Cardenismo – as a vehicle for radical reform – was less powerful, less speedy, and less capable of following its proposed route across a hostile terrain than is often supposed; that, in other words, it was more jalopy than juggernaut.

My first point, then, concerns the radical intentions of Cardenismo. Two immediate problems are apparent: the definition of the group and the elucidation of their goals. The imputation of motives and intentions requires some clarification of the group under discussion. Who were the Cardenistas? Like any major political movement (Maderismo, Villismo, Carrancismo, Obregonismo, Callismo), Cardenismo was a loose, heterogeneous and shifting coalition, put together in particular circumstances: in this case, the presidential campaigning of 1933–4 and the battle for power in 1934–6.²⁴ A key element in my argument, which will be developed later, is that ‘Cardenismo’ (broadly defined to include those who supported the government during 1934–40) embraced a host of time-servers and opportunists. Their Cardenista allegiance was skindeep and tactical. On the other hand, there were some groups – almost certainly a minority – who displayed a more genuine and enduring Cardenista allegiance. For some, ideological sympathy was paramount (and the 1930s

²³ This article derives from work-in-progress; its conclusion are in no sense definitive; and it may be that some of the cited primary sources – for example, British Foreign Office reports and the correspondence collected in the Archivo Francisco Múgica – tend, from their contrasting positions, to reinforce the arguments being advanced.

²⁴ Hamilton, *Limits of State Autonomy*, pp. 129–30; Alicia Hernández Chávez, *Historia de la Revolución Mexicana, periodo 1934–40. La mecánica cardenista* (Mexico, 1979).

were a decade when ideological polarities and allegiances were unusually strong and compelling: this was a decade of political mobilisation and commitment). Ideological Cardenistas identified with the administration's labour and agrarian reforms, its economic nationalism, socialist education and progressive foreign policy; but they linked these innovative policies to older political traditions of liberal-patriotism, freemasonry and jacobinism.²⁵

In some cases, this sympathy blended with material interest, since Cardenista policy offered concrete benefits: to the oil workers (at least up to 1938), or to the *ejidatarios* of La Laguna. This material identification, in turn, shaded into a form of political clientelism which was most obvious (and durable) in the case of Michoacán, where Cardenistas *de hueso colorado* shared an ideological, material and clientelist allegiance to Cárdenas, counting on him for political favours, rewards and protection.²⁶ Finally, there was an affective element: the charismatic appeal of the dour, honest, clean-living, frugal, horse-riding, tree-loving, patriotic president; one who travelled the country incessantly, reaching 'well-nigh inaccessible' places,²⁷ where no president (often no state governor) had previously gone; who hunkered down to talk to peasants in the dusty plazas of remote pueblos. If this forthrightness inspired popular support, it also provoked elite anxiety. Here was a president who not only displayed an unusual financial integrity, but who apparently took his rhetorical promises seriously: 'the president has shown a disconcerting tendency, one quite contrary to precedent, to give effect to his political professions'.²⁸ Or, as a Catholic proprietor put it: 'Calles es un malvado

²⁵ The analysis of these linkages – and of the mutation of liberal patriotism into Cardenista nationalism – would repay further research. I have touched upon the subject in 'Revolutionary Project, Recalcitrant People: Popular Culture and the Mexican Revolution', in Jaime Rodríguez O. (ed.), *The Revolutionary Process in Mexico: Essays on Political and Social Change, 1880–1940* (Los Angeles, 1990), pp. 227–64.

²⁶ Paul Friedrich, *The Princess of Naranja. An Essay in Anthropological Method* (Austin, 1986); John Gledhill, *Casi Nada: A Study of Agrarian Reform in the Homeland of Cardenismo* (Albany, 1991), chs. 2–4.

²⁷ Rees, Mexico City, to Foreign Office, 19 Dec. 1939, FO 371/24217, A359. For accounts of presidential visits, see Luis González, *Pueblo en vilo: Microhistoria de San José de Gracia*, 2nd ed. (Mexico, 1972), pp. 191–2; Ann L. Craig, *The First Agraristas: An Oral History of a Mexican Agrarian Reform Movement* (Berkeley, 1983), pp. 136–7. Both the Fondo Lázaro Cárdenas and the Dirección General de Gobierno of the Archivo General de la Nación (henceforth: AGN/FLC and AGN/DGG respectively) are crammed with petitions and solicitations, some of which strike a personal chord and suggest something of Cárdenas's popular and paternalist image. For example, Consuelo Torres, a courthouse typist of Toluca, to Cárdenas, 17 Dec. 1935, AGN/DGG 2.331.8 (12) 723, caja 29A, catalogues a series of personal tribulations – dead father, sick mother, low pay, overdue rent for a single room in a *casa de vecindad*, concluding: 'he abierto a ud mi corazón como si fuera ud mi padre'.

²⁸ Murray, Mexico City, to Foreign Office, 28 April 1936, FO 371/19792, A4142.

y un bribón y todo lo que hizo fue únicamente para su conveniencia; pero Cárdenas es un Bolsheviq ue de convicción'.²⁹

While these factors – ideological, material, clientelist, and affective – nurtured a powerful and enduring loyalty in some groups, it is not easy to calculate their numbers, still less to measure the depth of their allegiance. Cardenismo may be seen as a whirling galaxy of political groups and individuals: some at the galactic centre, some at the periphery; some held by a firm gravitational pull, some tenuously attached and liable to fly off in response to rival attractions. The story of the regime is replete with instances of conditional loyalties: Lombardo and the Lombardistas were crucial allies of Cárdenas, but they had their own agenda and differed from the President on important issues (notably, the question of who should organise the peasantry).³⁰ The Communists, though generally loyal (to a fault) after 1935, had to wrestle with conflicting obligations.³¹ *Políticos*, too, tacked across the turbulent political ocean of the 1930s: Cedillo helped make Cárdenas and was later unmade by him; Almazán, an ally in 1934–5, became a nemesis in 1939–40. Portes Gil typified the expedient *político* of the day: 'Callista con Calles, Cardenista con Cárdenas, en el fondo sólo es Portesgilista convencido'.³² Hard-core Cardenistas – *cardenistas de hueso colorado*, *cardenistas definidos y de corazón* – were a minority, outnumbered by the tactical recruits, the *cardenistas tibios*, the time-servers and opportunists (those whom the Catholic hierarchy charitably declined to excommunicate, since their adhesion to the Party and its atheistic tenets was rightly seen as lukewarm and involuntary).³³

This complicates the question of motivation, of what Cardenismo sought to achieve. A thorough analysis of Cardenismo – its goals, its radicalism – must take into account the different components of the movement and the contrasting agendas they espoused. Since that is not possible here, I shall instead focus on policies, though with the caveat that any discussion of the 'policies of Cardenismo' involves a good deal of reification: that is, the abstraction of 'policies' from the sociopolitical matrix in which they were conceived.

Whereas some recent analyses emphasise the relative moderation of Cardenista policy – its preservation of much of the status quo, its

²⁹ David (Fonseca Mora), Lookout Mt, Tenn., to Sra Antonia Mora Vda de Fonseca ('Mamacita'), Guadalajara, 16 Aug. 1935, AFM 106/48.

³⁰ Lyle C. Brown, 'Cárdenas: Creating a Campesino Power Base for Presidential Policy', in George Wolfskill and Douglas W. Richmond (eds.), *Essays on the Mexican Revolution: Revisionist Views of the Leaders* (Austin, 1979), pp. 109, 114–23.

³¹ Carr, 'Crisis in Mexican Communism'. ³² *El Hombre Libre*, 11 Dec. 1935.

³³ 'Advertencias al venerable clero y fieles del arzobispado de México', n.d., AFM 106/116, spelling out the risk of excommunication incurred by various levels of commitment to the PNR and its policies (especially socialist education).

commitment to continuity, its aversion to radical transformation, masked by radical rhetoric³⁴ – I am more struck by the genuine radicalism of the Cardenista project. Of course, radicalism may be rhetorical rather than practical; and any analysis which relies overmuch on Cardenista discourse would be abstract and idealist. However, rhetoric is also important in setting the political tone and conveying political messages; to that extent, it deserves consideration along with practical policy. Also, radicalism must be measured comparatively, according to meaningful historical criteria. In that respect, it makes more sense to compare Cardenismo not to some abstract model, but rather to empirical reality: to what went before – and what came after – in Mexico; or to what happened in the rest of contemporary Latin America (if not the world). Here, the catch-all concept of ‘populism’ – which tends to lump Cárdenas with Vargas, Perón, and others – may be more trouble than it is worth.³⁵

Consider the main items of Cardenista policy and their rhetorical penumbras. First, the agrarian reform – close to official extinction in the early 1930s³⁶ – was sweeping, rapid, and, in some respects, structurally innovative. Cárdenas distributed more land than all his revolutionary predecessors put together (a 400% increase, the landlords of Jalisco lamented);³⁷ he accelerated the process, often by means of dramatic personal interventions; and he promoted the collective ejido (hitherto a rare institution) in order to justify the expropriation of large commercial estates – La Laguna, Yucatán, Baja California, Sonora, Chiapas, Michoacán.³⁸ From today’s standpoint, where agrarian reforms are seen to be not only familiar but also happily consonant with capitalism,³⁹ this achievement may seem bland and unremarkable. At the time, it was dramatic, original and contentious. True, the landed interest had taken a battering during 1910–17, and had thereafter suffered a measure of economic and political erosion. In some cases, expropriation affected haciendas which had fallen on hard times, which were hard put to turn a profit; in some respects and in certain cases therefore, the agrarian reform

³⁴ Anguiano, *El Estado*, p. 92.

³⁵ Hernán Laborde, the PCM leader, made a forthright distinction between the Cárdenas government and those of Batista and Vargas, ‘gobiernos traidores vendidos a Wall Street’: speech in Cleveland, Ohio, 28 Dec. 1935, AFM 106/155. For more recent scholarly distinctions along the same lines: Hamilton, *The Limits of State Autonomy*, pp. 137–8, 141; and, for a critique of the catch-all category of ‘populism’, Ian Roxborough, ‘Unity and Diversity in Latin American History’, *Journal of Latin American Studies*, vol. 16 (1984), pp. 1–26.

³⁶ Craig, *The First Agraristas*, pp. 129–30.

³⁷ Antonio V. Sánchez, President, Unión Agrícola Regional de Chapala, to Lázaro Cárdenas, Jan. 1938, AFM vol. 179, p. 295.

³⁸ Luis González, *Historia de la Revolución Mexicana, Periodo 1934–40. Los días del presidente Cárdenas* (Mexico, 1981), pp. 89–107, 145–51, 157–63, 206–11.

³⁹ Alain de Janvry, *The Agrarian Question and Reformism in Latin America* (Baltimore, 1981).

might be seen as a form of 'socialisation of losses'. Played-out haciendas resembled the played-out railroad system; in both cases the emancipated workers had to live with the pressing obligations of collectivisation (this, as a foreign entrepreneur called it, was the 'ju-jitsu' approach: businesses rolled with the punch, retired from the fray with the best deal they could get, and left the workers to enjoy a possibly Pyrrhic victory).⁴⁰

However, this argument cannot be pushed too far. First, it is somewhat circular. Haciendas (and some businesses) were unprofitable precisely because they faced a popular challenge, the threat of reform, unionisation, higher wages and taxes.⁴¹ Property-owners declined to invest (some, arguably, sabotaged their enterprises), thus ensuring that their expropriators faced an uphill struggle. But, second, many enterprises indeed remained profitable; and, profits aside, such a major onslaught on property rights could not but offend the propertied class in general. There were, perhaps, a few farsighted businessmen who hailed the agrarian reform as a means to deepen the domestic market;⁴² but there were many more who denounced this radical experiment, with its socialist connotations. In Chihuahua (1935), 'feeling ... among landowners and industrialists is particularly bitter at the agrarian and labour policies of the government'; in the same year a member of a Jalisco landowning family predicted that 'if Cárdenas remains in power two or three years more, Mexico will be openly declared a Communist Republic, like Russia'.⁴³ As this comment suggests, the possibility that Cárdenas – like Ortiz Rubio – might not serve out his full term was readily entertained; plots and rumours of plots pullulated; the Laguna expropriation – the first major Cardenista onslaught upon the landowning class – aroused fears (or hopes) of a conservative insurrection.⁴⁴ Clearly, landlords and business-

⁴⁰ Conway, President of the Mexican Tramways Co., quoted in Murray, Mexico City, to Foreign Office, 17 Oct. 1935, FO 371/18703, 9251.

⁴¹ Alan Knight, 'Land and Society in Revolutionary Mexico: The Destruction of the Great Haciendas', *Mexican Studies/Estudios Mexicanos*, vol. 7, no. 1 (winter 1991), pp. 73–104.

⁴² Anguiano, *El Estado*, p. 42.

⁴³ Pyke, Mexico City, to Foreign Office, 29 Nov. 1935, FO 371/18707, 10787; David (Fonseca Mora), Lookout Mt, Tenn., to Sra Antonia Mora Vda de Fonseca ('Mamacita'), Guadalajara, 16 Aug. 1935, AFM 106/48. Three years later Mexico was still not Communist, but landlords were still lamenting their lot. For one example among many, see the report of Gobernación agent Concepción González, 19 March 1938, concerning 'algún hacendado del estado de Guanajuato [que] manifestó su disgusto por la situación que prevalece en el país respecto a la situación económica y haciendo infinidad de censuras para el gobierno': AGN, Dirección General de Información Política y Social, 000/93, t. 1, caja 4.

⁴⁴ Murray, Mexico City, 3 Oct. 1936, FO 371/19790, A7912. It should be added that rumours of coups and revolts came thick and fast during 1935–6; after a brief respite, they resumed following the petroleum nationalisation of March 1938; and were given further stimulus by the Cedillo revolt (May 1938) and the 1940 presidential campaign.

men did not complacently accept a benign ‘socialisation of losses’. Nor were they simply rasing the stage ghost of socialism. Cárdenas himself was no Communist, but Communists played their part in agrarian mobilisation (notably in the Laguna, but also in Veracruz, Michoacán, Jalisco and elsewhere).⁴⁵ Cardenista ideologues justified the agrarian reform in terms of its socialist potential: it represented a threatening alternative – not (as it would later become) a convenient adjunct – to capitalism. Ideology aside, some, like Gabino Vázquez, were thought to harbour a personal hatred of the *hacendado* class.⁴⁶

So, too, with labour and industry. Cardenista policy favoured industrialisation and economic development. But it also implied much more state regulation than most entrepreneurs were prepared to accept: ‘the intervention of the State [in the economy]’, Cárdenas promised in his inaugural address, ‘has to be increasingly great, increasingly frequent, and increasingly profound’.⁴⁷ Even if, in the long term, some state regulation rebounded to the benefit of business, this was not sufficient to allay the fears and suspicions of the business community, especially the ‘implacable’ Monterrey Group, who saw Cárdenas as the pro-Communist ‘harbinger of a socialistic regime’, and whose ‘abiding hatred’ of the President was in no sense mitigated by the economic progress of the Cárdenas years.⁴⁸ Again, while Cárdenas’s critics exaggerated his – and his administration’s – extremism, they did not conjure up Cardenista radicalism out of thin air. They were reacting to a genuine threat. Leading Cardenistas distinguished between (roughly) progressive and parasitic business interests, the latter including ‘big commerce which... represents no social right worthy of protection by a revolutionary government’.⁴⁹ Businesses which refused to collaborate with the regime, which resorted to lay-offs and lockouts, risked expropriation.⁵⁰

⁴⁵ Barry Carr, ‘El Partido Comunista y la movilización agraria en la Laguna, 1920–40: ¿una alianza obrero-campesina?’, *Revista Mexicana de Sociología*, vol. 51, no. 2 (1989), pp. 115–50; Fowler Salamini, *Agrarian Radicalism*, pp. 49–64; Craig, *The First Agraristas*, p. 147. Benigno Serrato, who replaced Cárdenas as Governor of Michoacán in 1932 and set out to scupper the radical Cardenista Confederación Revolucionaria Michoacana de Trabajo, was adamant that – in the case of the big plantations of Nueva Italia – ‘the unrest and rebellion of the workers have been caused by Communist leaders’, ‘very dangerous’ men, who had ‘acquired such authority that the workers repudiate and question their old representatives’: Serratos to Gobernación, 15 Jan. 1933, citing Victoriano Anguiano, AGN/DGG 2.331.8 (12), caja 29A. Nueva Italia would later be one of the major experiments in agrarian collectivisation under Cárdenas.

⁴⁶ Gallop, Mexico City, to Foreign Office, Oct. 1936, FO 371/19790, A9081.

⁴⁷ *Palabras y documentos públicos de Lázaro Cárdenas, 1928–1940*, t. I (Mexico, 1978), p. 139.

⁴⁸ Alex M. Saragoza, *The Monterrey Elite and the Mexican State, 1880–1940* (Austin, 1988), pp. 170–88. ⁴⁹ Múgica to Cárdenas, 16 June 1938, AFM vol. 179, p. 361.

⁵⁰ *Palabras y documentos*, pp. 191–2.

A corresponding ambivalence affected Cardenista labour policy. Cárdenas needed the support of organised labour in his battle with Calles, in which the CNDP, the nucleus of the later CTM, proved a redoubtable ally.⁵¹ But subsequent events showed that the alliance was conditional and that government and CTM differed over important questions – most obviously the key question of campesino recruitment.⁵² As regards specific unions and industrial disputes, too, the administration judged cases on their merits. Even during the administration's radical phase, groups like the railroad and Aguila Co. workers were denied wholehearted support;⁵³ during and after 1938, as the administration moderated, it clashed with the petroleum, railroad, and other workers; hence radicals like Múgica (then Minister of Communications) penned diatribes against self-seeking sindicatos, which selfishly maintained their militancy even after their capitalist masters had been replaced by public enterprises, deserving of patriotic support.⁵⁴ Nevertheless, compared to what had gone before (for example, Calles's decimation of the railroad workers in 1929), and compared to what was going on elsewhere in the 1930s (Italy, Germany, Argentina), the labour policy of the Cárdenas regime was genuinely radical, especially prior to 1938. Foreign specialists returning to Mexico in the mid-1930s, after a few years' absence, confronted a different scene.⁵⁵ Again, it is worth recalling – while allowing for a degree of propagandistic hype – the reaction of both anti-Cardenista political groups and of business interests themselves. Callistas spoke of 'Communist chaos', of 'an incessant agitation among workers' organisations and extremist propaganda, which has produced enormous uncertainty among vested interests'.⁵⁶ A US banker expressed his fear of the 'ultra-socialistic' tendencies undermining Mexico; employers denounced the 'extravagant', 'preposterous' and 'totally unacceptable' demands of labour, which the administration appeared more concerned to stimulate than to suffocate.⁵⁷

⁵¹ Samuel León and Ignacio Marván, *La clase obrera en la historia de México: en el cardenismo (1934-40)* (Mexico, 1985), pp. 88-98.

⁵² Brown, 'Cárdenas: Creating a Campesino Power Base for Presidential Policy', pp. 114-23.

⁵³ Farquhar, Mexico City, to Foreign Office, 30 Jan. 1935, FO 371/18705, A14532; Murray, Mexico City, 20 Feb. 1936, FO 371/19792, A1876.

⁵⁴ Múgica to Cárdenas, 15 Aug. and 30 Sept. 1937, AFM, vol. 179, pp. 119, 141.

⁵⁵ Murray, Mexico City, to Foreign Office, 17 Sept. 1935, FO 371/18708, 8586, apropos of Reuben Clark.

⁵⁶ 'Memorandum confidencial', n.d., probably Dec. 1935, on Callista activities in Coahuila, AFM 106/147; Padilla in *Palabras y documentos*, pp. 153. Many other examples could be given.

⁵⁷ Murray, Mexico City, to Foreign Office, 29 Oct. 1935, FO 371/18707, A9690; *ibid.*, 31 Oct. 1935, FO 371/18707, A9693; Farquhar, Mexico City, to Foreign Office (*re* Aguila Co. strike), 30 Jan. 1935, FO 371/18705, A14532; Monson, Mexico City, to Foreign Office, 31 Jan. 1935, FO 371/18708, A667.

Again, this was a distortion, but by no means a travesty, of reality. On taking office Cárdenas confronted a 'syndical explosion': within a month over sixty strikes were actual or pending in the DF alone; in the second half of 1935 2,295 strikes were counted.⁵⁸ And, while the later years of the administration witnessed a diminution of strike activity and official sympathy for the sindicatos, this still did not allay the fears of business. Business resented anti-inflation measures, the continual organisational efforts of the CTM, and (as the National Chamber of Commerce and Industry put it, in its 1939 report) the government's 'fantastic policy of unilateral betterment [pursued] in compliance with promises made to the proletariat'.⁵⁹ For this reason business, especially the Monterrey Group, bent its efforts to organise, lobby and mobilise in opposition to the administration and the CTM.⁶⁰

The mobilisation of labour was, of course, intimately bound up with the economic nationalism of the Cárdenas presidency. Although the administration displayed a commitment to nationalise Mexican resources (thus continuing – and accelerating – trends evident in the 1920s, if not before), economic nationalisation was not a dogmatic tenet. Cardenista policy-makers, although often deeply – perhaps justifiably – suspicious of foreign businesses, of their politicking, racism, and dubious book-keeping, nevertheless believed that foreign capital was required for Mexico's development; and they believed, too, that overly radical measures would incur the wrath of the USA.⁶¹ Allegations of sweeping

⁵⁸ Hernández Chávez, *La mecánica cardenista*, p. 140, which also gives the figures of registered strikes (13 in 1932, 202 in 1934, 650 in 1935). The higher figures in the text are from Farquhar, Mexico City, to Foreign Office, 24 Jan. 1935, FO 371/18705, A1337, and Murray, Mexico City, to Foreign Office, 27 Feb. 1936, FO 371/19792, A1876, citing CGOCM data. As the work-in-progress of Marcos Aguila of the UAM-Atzacapotzalco shows, figures of *registered* strikes, by neglecting actual ('wildcat') strikes, not to mention other indicators of shopfloor protest, significantly underestimate the incidence of such protest during the years 1932–5.

⁵⁹ Medin, *Ideología y praxis política de Lázaro Cárdenas*, pp. 205–6; Rees, Mexico City, to Foreign Office, 3 Jan. 1940, FO 371/24217, A547. The army, too, was leery of syndical power: a Gobernación informer reported a café conversation between two military officers who 'said they were fed up with the outrages (*barbaridades*) of the famous sindicatos... that the President was too tolerant of them, but... that the Army was now tired of putting up with such abuse (*tanto atropello*)': report of S-19, Mexico City, 12 May 1938, in AGN/Dirección General de Información Política y Social, Caja 4, 000/93, tomo II. The same source, 22 March 1938, tomo I, reports broad support (evident in 'conversaciones tenidas con diversas personas en la calle') for the oil expropriation, but considerable doubt as to the capacity of the oil workers' union, 'opinando casi toda la gente que cuando antes el Ciudadano Presidente debe terminar con las ideas comunistas, a fin de cimentar la prosperidad de la nación, pues de lo contrario temen que será un rotundo fracaso la mencionada disposición (*sc. de expropiación*)'.⁶⁰ Saragoza, *The Monterrey Elite*, pp. 188–97.

⁶¹ Duggan, State Department, 5 Jan. 1938, State Department Record, 812.6363/3065; Daniels, Mexico City, to State Department, 19 March 1938, 812.6363/3103; Marte R.

economic nationalism, wedded to a Boxerish xenophobia, were grossly exaggerated.⁶² However, even if the regime's policy was relatively pragmatic, that did not rule out new departures and radical innovations. Foreign businesses deplored the new bias against them – and in favour of the unions – which labour courts and political authorities now displayed; they were also puzzled that Cárdenas himself was above bribery.⁶³ To the end, most foreign observers continued to regard Cárdenas as a dangerous radical.⁶⁴ This image was dramatically confirmed, of course, by the petroleum nationalisation of March 1938. Contrary to business opinion, the expropriation was not planned in advance (the Expropriation Law had not, in fact, been concocted, three years earlier, with this eventuality in mind);⁶⁵ rather, expropriation arose out of a complex and fluid situation in which the militancy of the oil workers and the intransigence of the oil companies generated an awkward stalemate – which, in Cárdenas's eyes, threatened both national economic well-being and national honour and decorum. Hence the expropriation of March 1938, which, at the time, constituted an unprecedented example of Third World nationalism; a challenge to the oil companies, and thus to international capital, which provoked a strenuous response.⁶⁶ Again, contemporary opinion did not see this as a measure calculated to benefit the Mexican national bourgeoisie; indeed, the bourgeoisie, while careful not to display a treasonable sympathy for the expropriated companies, clearly did not relish this attack on foreign capital.⁶⁷ Amid the well-orchestrated patriotic demonstrations of spring 1938, the business and professional classes

Gómez to Emilio Portes Gil, 3 Feb. 1928, in *Vida Política Contemporánea: Cartas de Marte R. Gómez*, t. I (Mexico, 1978), pp. 194–6.

⁶² The Aguila Company's report of 'violently anti-foreign agitation' at its Minatitlán plant had a kernel of truth: Murray, Mexico City, to Foreign Office, 29 May 1935, FO 371/18797, A5539. Such reports provided the inspiration for blanket assertions of the 'epidemic of economic nationalism which continues to afflict the world', which was deemed 'particularly acute' in Mexico: Murray, Mexico City, to Foreign Office, 12 March 1935, FO 371/18705, A3050.

⁶³ Cárdenas was 'curiously innocent in these matters and did not properly appreciate business conventions as understood in Mexico': Murray, Mexico City, to Foreign Office, 15 July 1935, FO 371/18708, A6865.

⁶⁴ 'Cárdenas has definitely thrown in his hand completely with the extreme leftist elements in the country': Davidson (Aguila Co.) to Godber, 3 May 1940, FO 371/24217, A2619.

⁶⁵ Memorandum of Minister Campos Gómez, 13 July, 1938, AFM vol. 182/4.

⁶⁶ George Philip, 'The Expropriation in Comparative Perspective', in Jonathan C. Brown and Alan Knight (eds.), *The Mexican Petroleum Industry in the Twentieth Century* (Austin, 1992), pp. 173–88.

⁶⁷ Alan Knight, 'The Politics of the Expropriation', in Brown and Knight (eds.), *The Mexican Petroleum Industry*, pp. 90–128.

remained relatively silent and circumspect.⁶⁸ Foreign (and some Mexican) businessmen consoled themselves with the thought that the nationalist experiment would fail and that the companies would soon be invited back; Mexican business rubbed its corporate hands at the prospect of Cárdenas suffering a major setback as a result of the expropriation.⁶⁹

Meanwhile, the regime's commitment to socialist (and sex) education aroused fierce passions. Again, 'socialist education' begs a host of questions. It meant different things to different people (one student has counted 33 different interpretations).⁷⁰ For some proponents, it was the old laicising, anticlerical message dressed up in new garb; for some, an emulation of the Soviet Union (hence it obeyed a productionist rationale); for others, an incitement to class antagonism (it would, explained Education Minister García Téllez, inculcate in youth 'the revolutionary spirit, with a view to their fighting against the capitalist regime and establishing a dictatorship of the proletariat').⁷¹ Irrespective of interpretations, polemical distortions or, indeed, of the ultimate outcome, it is clear that the socialist education programme stirred strong feelings, symptomatic of the ideologically charged 1930s. This, after all, was a time when Soviet texts circulated in the Colegio Militar; when, as the Callista Ezequiel Padilla put it, 'we are submerged in a flood of Soviet phrases'; when the Catholic Liga Nacional Defensora de la Libertad alleged a covert plot between Cárdenas and Hernán Laborde for the dissemination of Communism in Mexico and the Bishop of Huejutla complained to King George V of England that Mexico had become 'a very hell of Bolshevism'.⁷² Violent feelings generated violent actions: attacks on teachers which spanned the later 1930s and continued into the 1940s (and which, of course, provoked anticlerical reprisals, like the bloody taking of Cherán [Michoacán] on Maundy Thursday 1937).⁷³ These occurred not only in the celebrated Cristero regions of the centre-west, but also in less 'fanatical' states like Veracruz; and they indicated that Cárdenas's post-1938 moderation failed to dispel the strong antagonisms engendered in earlier years.⁷⁴ For, especially where education was concerned, these

⁶⁸ Víctor Manuel Villaseñor, *Memorias de un hombre de izquierda* (Mexico, 1976), pp. 414–15. My own review of State Department sources (see n. 67) tends to confirm this.

⁶⁹ Blocker, Monterrey, and Boyle, Agua Prieta, to State Department, 21, 24 March 1938, SD 812.6363/3134, 3188.

⁷⁰ John A. Britton, *Educación y radicalismo en México*, 2 vols. (Mexico, 1976).

⁷¹ Farquhar, Mexico City, to Foreign Office, 24 Jan. 1935, FO 371/18705, A1338.

⁷² *Palabras y documentos*, 160; Boletín de la LNDL, 1935, AFM 106/117; José de Jesús, San Antonio, to King George V, 17 Dec. 1934, FO 371/18707, A1008.

⁷³ David Raby, *Educación y revolución social en México, 1921–1940* (Mexico, 1974); Friedrich, *Princess of Naranja*, pp. 162–3.

⁷⁴ For Catholic and Sinarquista violence (chiefly in Veracruz) see AGN/Gobernación, 2/380(26)/8, Caja 40.

antagonisms involved atavistic loyalties and hatreds: if the Cardenistas, invoking Hidalgo or Juárez, placed themselves in the radical, patriotic, liberal tradition, their Catholic enemies conjured up the memory of 'the immortal Iturbide'.⁷⁵

In this ideologically charged atmosphere, foreign policy also bulked large. And, for once, 'foreign policy' covered much more than the basic bilateral relationship between Mexico and its lowering northern neighbour. Of course, the familiar questions of debt, foreign investment, the limits of US intervention, remained pending. But they were now matched by new and pressing foreign policy issues which assumed a strong ideological colouration and readily inserted themselves into domestic politics: resistance to fascism, popular frontism, the Austrian civil war, the Italian invasion of Abyssinia, Japanese aggression against China, and, above all, the Spanish Civil War. At a time when the Mexican economy was undergoing a marked introversion, Mexican politics experienced an unprecedented extraversion: domestic political differences were redefined and deepened in terms of international conflicts. 'Cárdenas defeated at Teruel', conservative graffiti proclaimed in 1938; the workers' militia which paraded in Mexico City on May Day 1940 was said to have been trained by Spanish Republican refugees.⁷⁶ The latter, of course, got a mixed reception: heroes to the Mexican left (including Mexican freemasonry) they were atheistic subversives in the eyes of the right.⁷⁷ When Almazán campaigned in 1940 he found a new usage for the old warcry: *mueran los gachupines*.⁷⁸ To an unusual degree, therefore, Mexicans now saw their own political conflicts as part of a global process. 'The prevailing mood in Jalisco is fascism', declared a local agrarista in 1936; in the same year, a ruined Spanish landowner, a victim of the Mexican agrarian reform, pledged his modest aid to the Franquista cause.⁷⁹ On the left, this new internationalisation of Mexican politics sometimes encouraged radical new departures (e.g. where it involved somewhat uncritical adulation and mimicry of the Soviet Union: the *ejido* as *kolkhoz*);

⁷⁵ Boletín de la LNDL (n. 72 above); Artemio Martín, Ozuluama, to Gobernación, 25 Feb. 1947, AGN/Gobernación 2/380(26)/8, reports Sinarquista celebration of the memory of Iturbide and denigration of *las chusmas* of Hidalgo.

⁷⁶ Jean Meyer, *El sinarquismo: ¿un fascismo Mexicano? 1937-47* (Mexico, 1979), p. 37. See also Olivia Gall, *Trotsky en México* (Mexico, 1991), pp. 34, 41, 83, which discounts Cárdenas's ideological sympathy for the Spanish Republic, and T. G. Powell, 'Mexico', in Mark Falcoff and Frederick T. Pike (eds.), *The Spanish Civil War, 1936-39: American Hemispheric Perspectives* (Lincoln, 1982), pp. 45-99, especially pp. 59, 73-81, which, in contrast, stresses this sympathy, in my view correctly.

⁷⁷ González, *Los días del Presidente Cárdenas*, pp. 132-7, 229-39.

⁷⁸ Rees to Foreign Office, 2 May 1940, FO 371/24217, A2619.

⁷⁹ Craig, *The First Agraristas*, p. 133: Pío Noriega, Higuera, Nuevo León, to General Miguel Cabanellas, Burgos, 21 Sept. 1936, AFM 106/318.

sometimes, on the other hand, it stifled dissent and fostered discipline (e.g. with the PCM's self-effacing popular frontism).⁸⁰ However, what internationalisation certainly did was to sharpen political divisions within the country: most obviously by pitting left against right, but also by dividing groups on both the left (Lombardistas, Stalinists, Trotskyists) and the right ('clerical' conservatives versus 'secular' radicals, i.e. fascists or quasi-fascists).⁸¹ Mexicans clearly felt they were playing for high stakes. Antagonisms ran deep: virulent polemic and apocalyptic visions flourished across the entire political spectrum. Fascist Gold Shirts fought with Communists in the Zócalo on the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Revolution; cars and cavalry skirmished leaving three dead and fifty injured.⁸² In remote, bucolic San José de Gracia, where the dead victims of agrarian violence arrived at the north portal of the church at the rate of one a month, the people consoled themselves with the thought that 'in the neighbouring villages the number of brawls and deaths was much greater than in San José'.⁸³ The 1930s were emphatically not an era of bland populism. Thus, any analysis of the Cardenista years must take into account these powerful subjective factors – which, with the perverse benefit of hindsight, are sometimes overlooked or underestimated.

The drift of the argument so far is that the Cárdenas regime adopted radical policies and rhetoric and that, no less important, both supporters and opponents saw the regime as attempting radical new initiatives, which they loved or loathed according to taste. Ultimately, many of these initiatives failed. They either died an early death or survived under a new dispensation, adopting different roles and characteristics. More of that in the conclusion. First, while the focus remains on the 1930s, we should ask why failure was so recurrent. This brings us to the second and third questions raised above: was the provenance of Cardenista policy popular or elitist (in other words, was this a top-down or a bottom-up reform project)? And how effective was the state in implementing policies, especially those which encountered strong opposition?

The answer to the first of these questions is, like so many historical answers, 'a bit of both'. That is to say, policy emanated from above, but was also influenced by pressure from below. We cannot quantify this ratio,

⁸⁰ Carr, 'Crisis in Mexican Communism'. For enthusiastic endorsements of Soviet society and policy, see the letters of Víctor Manuel Villaseñor to his family (from the USSR) 16, 21 Aug., 9 Sept. 1935, AFM 106/71, 72, 73.

⁸¹ Gall, *Trotsky en México*, pp. 30, 144–5; Hugh G. Campbell, *La derecha radical en México, 1929–1949* (Mexico, 1976).

⁸² Murray, Mexico City, to Foreign Office, 21 Nov. 1935, FO 371/18707, A10388; González, *Los días del Presidente Cárdenas*, p. 69, graphically illustrates the superiority of car over cavalry.

⁸³ González, *Pueblo en vilo*, p. 186.

but we can attempt some impressionistic evaluation. For example, we can make comparisons with other times and regimes; we can attempt to distinguish between regions and communities within the country; and we can suggest that 'top-down' decision-making was more apparent in some areas of policy, 'bottom-up' pressure in others. Again, this article can only sketch some arguments. First, the evidence for popular mobilisation in the 1930s is strong. The armed revolution had initiated a process which, while it lost some momentum between roughly 1917 and 1932, revived thereafter. Agrarian demands quickened; rural unionisation advanced; national labour organisations multiplied. The CROM fragmented, giving rise to the CGOCM, the CNDP, later the CTM. Organisational advance was matched by a definite radicalisation. The oil workers pressed for a comprehensive collective contract; some (notably those of the Poza Rica district) began to advocate nationalisation. Similar tendencies were apparent with the railway workers. As workers and peasants mobilised, many in support of Cárdenas's presidential candidacy and programme, entrenched elites confronted serious challenges. 'The Laguna labour situation is intolerable', wrote a plantation manager in January 1936; and the threat of expropriation hung over the cotton kingdom like a 'sword of Damocles'.⁸⁴

Four points should be made about the popular mobilisation of the 1930s. First, we should not overlook the fact that popular mobilisation could assume a conservative and Catholic form. The 'Second Cristiada' was small beer compared to the great insurrection of 1926–9; but the UNS, officially born in 1937, boasted over half a million members by 1943; and it elicited support not simply in the traditionally Catholic heartland of the Bajío and Centre-West.⁸⁵ This is a point to return to in the conclusion.

Second, popular mobilisation, whether of the left or the right, was unprecedented in terms of scale and organisation. Comparisons with the 1910s are difficult, precisely because the organisational modes had changed. Local guerrilla insurrection had given way to mass-based political mobilisation. True, local guerrillas – such as El Tallarín – remained active in some regions; but their forces were small and, it is worth noting, they were often allegedly linked to broader political movements, as El Tallarín was to the Gold Shirts.⁸⁶ Switching the

⁸⁴ T. Fairbairn to R. Benson, 7, 10 Jan. 1938, Mexican Cotton Estates of Tlahualilo Papers, Kleinwort Benson Archive, Speen, Newbury, Berks, UK.

⁸⁵ Meyer, *El sinarquismo*, pp. 44–7; Gobernación records for the 1940s indicate sustained Sinarquista support and agitation in Veracruz (see n. 74 above).

⁸⁶ Murray, Mexico City, to Foreign Office, 17 Oct. 1935, FO 371/18707, A9252; Ramón Ramírez Melgarejo, 'La bola chiquita, un movimiento campesino', in Laura Helguera R. et al., *Los campesinos de la tierra de Zapata*, t. I, *Adaptación, cambio y rebelión* (Mexico,

comparison away from the revolutionary decade (1910–20), we can confidently state that popular mobilisation in the 1930s was greater than that of the 1920s or the 1950s.⁸⁷ It was also more sophisticated: peasant communities increasingly merged their local efforts into broader organisations; sympathy strikes among workers became common, in some cases threatening or producing general strikes; teachers made common cause with workers and peasants. The petroleum nationalisation offered a revealing litmus test of the capacity of mass organisations (unions, schools, *ejidos*, peasant leagues) to mobilise in support of the regime.⁸⁸ Rural communities in the remote *tierra caliente* of Guerrero, or the distant Pacific coast of Chiapas, now rallied to the radical nationalist cause.⁸⁹ Ideology, too, became more sophisticated (at least according to conventional criteria).⁹⁰

Third, the role of the state increased. Here, the revisionists make a valid point. Popular organisations became important assets of the regime in its construction of a strong state; specifically, they helped the government topple *caudillos*, tame the army, confront foreign interests, and enhance its

1974), on continued 'traditional' peasant protest, involving El Tallarín, in the 1940s; El Tallarín's links to the Gold Shirts are alleged in Memo. on Gold Shirt activity, 11 Sept. 1936, AFM 106/192.

⁸⁷ I omit reference to the 1940s, since we have few studies of popular protest in that decade; a cursory review of the literature, and of some limited secondary sources, suggests that land seizures, hunger marches, urban demonstrations, and anti-conscription protests were quite extensive: 'we are living really on a social volcano now', the US Ambassador reported in May 1944. See Stephen R. Niblo, 'The Impact of War: Mexico and World War II' (La Trobe University Institute of Latin American Studies, Occasional Paper No. 10, 1988), p. 12.

⁸⁸ Knight, 'The Politics of the Expropriation'. The British Minister lamented that 'the situation has not been improved owing to the discovery by the labour unions of the extent to which they can apply still further pressure by means of sympathy strikes on a Government whose tendency is to incline whenever possible to the side of labour': Murray, Mexico City, to Foreign Office, 15 Feb. 1935, FO 371/18075, A2058.

⁸⁹ Fidel Hernández, comisario ejidal, Las Cruces, Gro, to Lázaro Cárdenas, 19 March 1938; Amado Pérez Ulloa, Sindicato Trabajadores Socialistas, Pijijiapam, Chis., to Francisco Múgica, 19 March 1938, AFM 182/155, 178.

⁹⁰ That is, the more 'traditional' modes of expression of popular protest – premised on the *patria chica*, imbued with folk religiosity, harking back to past heroes like Hidalgo and Juárez – tended to give way to (or to blend with) more 'modern' modes: socialist, communist, internationalist. Denunciations of arbitrary local officials were as old as the colony; now, however, they were couched in a different discourse. A single example from the politically violent hot country of the Gulf lowlands: Vicente Cervantes, secretary-general of the Comité Permanente del Frente Unico de Obreros y Campesinos del Istmo, Puerto México, 12 July 1935, protests to the Governor of Veracruz concerning 'los métodos de represión de tipo fachista' being employed by the presidente municipal of Sayula who, with his *pistoleros*, attacked a May Day demonstration, 'pues...este señor cree que tienen más fuerza sus pistolas que las fuerzas incontenibles del proletariado': AGN/DGG, 2.331.8(26) 3173, caja 44A.

own power. However, it does not follow that these organisations were pliant puppets of a Machiavellian regime. Here, we enter a familiar debate which has acquired fresh relevance with the growth of so-called 'new social movements' in Mexico, as well as Latin America and the world at large. How far can a popular movement proceed without having to come to terms with the state? Does deliberate isolation – premised on a mistrust of the state – denote integrity, or does it merely ensure impotence? Recent debates suggest that, normative judgements aside, it is empirically almost impossible for popular movements to avoid the embrace of the state; indeed, it is only by entering that embrace (cautiously, with eyes open, and passion stilled) that popular movements can achieve positive results.⁹¹ In other words, the relationship between the state and popular movements is a mutually conditional one, albeit rarely if ever an equal one. The same was true of the 1930s: the state needed popular support; popular causes needed state champions. Cárdenas was known to be sympathetic and, especially as he confronted Calles in 1935–6, he needed support and was prepared to pay (politically) for it.⁹² So, too, in the provinces: in Tlaxcala, Jalisco, and elsewhere, local political leaders, of neither peasant origin nor agrarista persuasion, felt obliged to court campesino support (not, as I shall discuss shortly, campesino *votes*); in the Laguna 'bureaucrats became aware that they had created an autonomous independent peasant organization, possessed of its own power'.⁹³ Workers and peasants thus operated within an unusually favourable political context; their scope for manoeuvre – although never that ample – was greater than it had been in the 1920s, or would be in the 1940s and 1950s. Indeed, some hostile observers feared a runaway process, which they characterised according to the now familiar cliché: 'the government have [*sic*] like Frankenstein raised a monster that they do not know how to control'.⁹⁴ Certainly the mobilisation of the early Cárdenas years led to outcomes (such as the petroleum nationalisation) which had not been scripted in advance, and which were the product of a fluid political dialectic.⁹⁵ Furthermore, it was precisely in those areas where popular support was most evident (e.g.

⁹¹ See Joe Foweraker and Ann L. Craig, *Popular Movements and Political Change in Mexico* (Boulder, 1990).

⁹² Hernández Chávez, *La mecánica cardenista*, pp. 140–47; Craig, *The First Agraristas*, p. 102.

⁹³ Raymond Buvé, 'State Governors and Peasant Mobilization in Tlaxcala', in D. A. Brading (ed.), *Caudillo and Peasant in the Mexican Revolution* (Cambridge, 1980), pp. 229–35; Craig, *The First Agraristas*, pp. 134–5; Tomás Martínez Saldaña, *El costo social de un éxito político. La política expansionista del Estado mexicano en el agro lagunero* (Chapingo, 1980), p. 35.

⁹⁴ Murray, Mexico City, to Foreign Office, 15 Feb. 1935, FO 371/18705, A2058.

⁹⁵ Knight, 'Politics of the Expropriation'; North and Raby, 'The Dynamics of Revolution and Counter-revolution'.

labour and agrarian reform) that the regime wrought the most radical and lasting changes; on the other hand, where popular support was at a discount, where reforms were more elitist in origin and ‘top-down’ in direction, success was limited and short-lived: the socialist education project was, certainly in terms of its ambitious objectives, a failure (especially in states like Puebla; less so in, say, Sonora);⁹⁶ *indigenista* programmes (which were rarely the result of Indian pressure) proved disappointing; the regime’s attempts to build a national consensus against international fascism were – if the experience of the Second World War is anything to go by – of limited impact. Here, assertions of ‘top-down’ political dictation have some validity: but the point to stress is the *inefficacy* of such dictation.

Conversely, in some areas – of policy, of the country – popular pressures were crucial. The sweeping agrarian reforms of the 1930s followed many years of protest, of repression, of low-intensity agrarian warfare. If, in some instances, Cárdenas imposed the reform from above, destroying *gemeinschaftlich* rural communities, this was hardly the norm. Significant agrarian struggle preceded reform in most cases: in the Laguna; in Chiapas; in the Yaqui Valley; in Michoacán; and in the many lesser, more localised cases, where agrarista forces now found ‘the centre’ inclining to their cause.⁹⁷ Indeed, as the revisionists must accept, unless there had been some prior mobilisation – some proven demonstration of agrarista strength – there was no reason for a supposedly cynical and manipulative state to attempt its cynical manipulation. ‘Top-down’ reform either constituted an irrational and dogmatic imposition, of questionable political benefit; or it implied a recognition on the part of the reformers that the agrarista constituency was powerful and worth courting. Perhaps Yucatán was an example of the first, of dogma outrunning expedience (although the image of a docile Maya *campesinado* needs careful qualification).⁹⁸ But in most cases the balance was different

⁹⁶ See the recent excellent work of Mary Kay Vaughan: ‘The implementation of national policy in the countryside: socialist education in Puebla in the Cárdenas period’, paper given at VIIth Conference of Mexican and US Historians, Oaxaca, 1986; and ‘Women School Teachers in the Mexican Revolution: The Story of Reyna’s Braids’, *Journal of Women’s History*, vol. 2, no. 1 (1990), pp. 143–68.

⁹⁷ Barry Carr, ‘El Partido Comunista’; Thomas Benjamin, *A Rich Land, A Poor People: Politics and Society in Modern Chiapas* (Albuquerque, 1989), ch. 6; Craig, *The First Agraristas*; Paul Friedrich, *Agrarian Revolt in a Mexican Village* (Chicago, 1977).

⁹⁸ Murray, Mexico City, to Foreign Office, 17 Oct. 1935, FO 371/18707, A9252, reports sparsely that in Yucatán ‘angry peasants appear to have kicked over the traces and defied the local authorities’. Fernando Benítez, *Ki: El drama de un pueblo y una planta* (Mexico, 1985), gives no immediate background to the 1937 *reparto*. However, the current research of Gilbert Joseph and Allen Wells (on an earlier period) qualifies our impression of a docile Maya *peonaje*; further research on the early 1930s might do the same.

and the agrarian reform derived, significantly if not wholly, from the efforts of the agraristas themselves. The cases of San Diego and Río Verde (SLP) are illustrative: internal debilitation preceded external political intervention: 'it is a fact that Saturnino Cedillo and the forces of the government would not have been able to affect the property without the support of the workers'.⁹⁹

The same was true of labour reform: the unions had to display some muscle if they were to be recruited to the government team. Furthermore, the unions also displayed considerable autonomy. The story of the petroleum dispute showed that the unions were by no means clients of the regime (still less was the regime in the pocket of the unions). The other major industrial unions, too, regarded their alliance with the government – and the CTM – as tactical and conditional (hence the growing dissent after 1938). In short, the relationship between state and popular movement was two-way, with pressures being transmitted in both directions.¹⁰⁰ Perhaps the state held the whiphand (that is a difficult question, both theoretically and empirically); but it held the whiphand less securely than it would in later years, when the CTM and CNC had developed into powerful instruments of corporate control, rather than representation. 'At present labour has the upper hand', reported a British observer in 1935, 'and no official... dare put into effect any decision, however justly made, if it does not meet all the demands of the sindicatos.'¹⁰¹ Hyperbole, no doubt; but hyperbole that would not have been penned in 1925, still less in 1945.

However, 'representation' did not necessarily take liberal-democratic forms. The 'liberal/Vasconcelista' critique of Cardenismo is valid, albeit (in my view) somewhat wrongheaded. The popular mobilisation of the 1930s, which I am choosing to stress, did not assume conventional liberal democratic forms. It was not characterised by limpid elections and Gladstonian notions of civic responsibility. On the contrary, it was marked by bossism, violence, vendettas, and corruption. These liberal failings did not make the process wholly unrepresentative, however. (It hardly needs stressing that liberal-democratic regimes display similar

⁹⁹ Marijosé Amerlinck de Bontempo, 'La reforma agraria en la hacienda de San Diego de Río Verde,' in Heriberto García Moreno, *Después de los latifundios (La desintegración de la gran propiedad agraria en México)* (Zamora, 1982), pp. 183–98.

¹⁰⁰ For examples of workers (tram workers and miners) dissenting from and putting pressure on the authorities: Murray, Mexico City, to Foreign Office, 1 Aug. 1935, FO 371/18703, A6916; Pyke, Mexico City, to Foreign Office, 29 Nov. 1935, FO 371/18707, 10787.

¹⁰¹ British vice-consul Puerto México, 28 May 1935, FO 371/18708, A5487. The writer, of course, was witnessing labour conditions on the Isthmus, specifically at the Aguila Co. plant, which had a particularly powerful (and, in British eyes, wayward) labour movement.

failings and that, even when these failings are curtailed, the degree of 'representation' afforded by liberal politics may be questioned.) In some cases, in fact, the 'undemocratic' representation of the 1930s may have been relatively direct and effective. Leaders and followers acted in close unison. That was the case in some agrarian movements, where leaders – like Macedonio Ayala of Lagos – combined political skill (and, as it happens, a non-peasant background) with idealism and self-sacrifice; or, Olvera argues, in the Poza Rica oil field, where regular mass meetings constrained the sindical leadership.¹⁰²

But even if such examples of direct democracy are few, or even questionable, it does not follow that representation *per se* was absent. Mexico had (and has) a weak tradition of electoral democracy, but a rich tradition of popular mobilisation. *Caciques* may stymie electoral procedures, but they can also lead genuinely popular movements in pursuit of genuinely popular goals. Naranja's agrarian leaders – Machiavellian 'princes', in Friedrich's terms – were hardly model democrats: they fought, feuded, grafted and plotted.¹⁰³ But they did enjoy a degree of genuine support in the community and, by virtue of their Machiavellian methods, they won and held an *ejido*, in the face of strenuous landlord and clerical opposition. The Laguna reform, too, was carried through – and subsequently sustained, in the face of considerable opposition – by agrarista *caciques*, who enjoyed substantial popular support: leadership sprang from the communities, 'the campesinos exercised control over their leaders', and the combative Unión Central remained 'loyal to its base, not to the government, not to the State'.¹⁰⁴ Levels of support, of course, are hard to estimate. Frequently, reform divided a community into factions (landlords were not above conniving at such an outcome); and rival factions, whether in *ejidos* or *sindicatos*, invariably claimed to represent the majority. Given Mexico's preceding history and prevailing political culture, this was hardly surprising: local conflicts were likely to be mediated through murky *caciquismo* rather than transparent democracy. However, as numerous studies have shown, *caciques* were not invariably imposed petty dictators; nor, indeed, was the absence of keen and clean party competition a bar to representation (consider the political history of Juchitán).¹⁰⁵ Rather than stress the timelessness of *caciquismo*, hence the

¹⁰² Craig, *The First Agraristas*, pp. 116, 119; Alberto Olvera, 'The Rise and Fall of Union Democracy at Poza Rica, 1932–1940', in Brown and Knight (eds.), *The Mexican Petroleum Industry*, pp. 63–89.

¹⁰⁴ Martínez Saldaña, *El costo social*, pp. 33, 35.

¹⁰⁵ Jeffrey W. Rubin, 'Popular Mobilization and the Myth of State Corporatism', in Craig and Foweraker, *Popular Movements*, pp. 247–67. One of Rubin's main points is that popular representation – as conceived by 'the people' themselves – did and does not necessarily have to involve multiparty competition.

alleged continuity of practice stretching from the Revolution down to the present, we should distinguish between forms of *caciquismo* and the objectives which *caciques* espoused. For *caciquismo* – like liberal democracy – is a procedural mechanism; it can generate different policy outcomes. Therefore, we should try to clarify the political persuasions, constituencies, and careers of *caciques*: we should distinguish between radical and conservatives, anticlericals and clericals; between *caciques* who enjoyed substantial local support, and those whose power derived from above, or from the centre.¹⁰⁶ This is not easy; and it may be made more difficult by the propensity of *caciques* progressively to shed their popular support in favour of the endorsement of the centre and/or of local elites (we might say: the only good *cacique* is – if not a dead *cacique* – at least a short-lived *cacique*). Perhaps this explains some of the wide divergences of interpretation to be found in this key area of Mexican political history: for example, was Juan Paxtian of San Andrés Tuxtla the popular champion portrayed by Miguel Covarrubias or the vicious tyrant described by Heather Fowler Salamini?¹⁰⁷ Similar questions might be asked about Don Flavio of Arandas.¹⁰⁸

Value judgements aside, there are a couple of solid points which can be made. First, during the politically stormy 1930s, even the most cynically self-interested of *cacique* probably had to trim his sails to catch the popular wind: as Rubén Carrizosa had to do in Tlaxcala, or Porfirio Rubio in the Sierra Alta de Hidalgo.¹⁰⁹ Second, as this case illustrates, Cárdenas had to co-exist with *caciques*. Just as his consolidation of presidential power required a series of deals with key *políticos* (Cedillo, Amaro, Almazán, Portes Gil), so too at the regional and local level Cárdenas had to work with the political materials to hand. Some cacical clients (like Ernesto Prado of Michoacán) were old allies; some, like the *caciques* of Morelos, were vested interests with whom collaboration was expedient; some, like the Indian *caciques* of Chiapas, were indirect but (arguably) unavoidable

¹⁰⁶ A good example is the discussion of forms of *caciquismo*, based on the careers of Saturnino Cedillo and Gonzalo N. Santos, by Enrique Márquez, ‘Gonzalo N. Santos o la naturaleza del “tantómetro político”’, in Carlos Martínez Assad (ed.), *Estadistas, caciques y caudillos* (Mexico, 1988), pp. 385–94.

¹⁰⁷ Cf. Fowler Salamini, *Agrarian Radicalism*, p. 160, and Miguel Covarrubias, *El sur de México* (Mexico, 1980), pp. 55–63.

¹⁰⁸ According to Martínez Saldaña, ‘Formación y transformación de una oligarquía’, pp. 68–9, Don Flavio lacked ‘any base of popular support,’ but was local, skilled in horseriding and shooting, ‘de carácter simpático bondadoso... con un gran don de gente,’ possessed of a network of *compadrazgos* and a cantina that never closed. His power did not rest solely on coercion or Federal government backing.

¹⁰⁹ Buve, ‘State Governors and Peasant Mobilisation in Tlaxcala’, p. 241; Frans Schryer, *The Rancheros of Pasañores: the History of a Peasant Bourgeoisie in Twentieth-Century Mexico* (Toronto, 1980), p. 92.

products of Cardenista policy.¹¹⁰ *Caciquismo* was a fact of political life, which a reforming president, anxious for concrete results, had to reckon with. To have ignored – or tried to eliminate – *caciquismo* would have been to risk political suicide, to invite the fate of Ortiz Rubio, and to shelve *sine die* plans for social reform which were not inherently incompatible with *caciquista* styles of rule.

The prevalence of *caciquismo* does not, therefore, disqualify the radical and popular claims of Cardenismo. But it raises the next question: that of the power of the state. It is a commonplace that the Cárdenas administration strengthened both state and party, thus cementing the rule of the central government as never before. But, like many commonplaces, this tends to be repeated more than analysed. The ‘strength of the state’ is a loose concept: what does it mean in practice? On one level, it may be measured, roughly and positivistically, in terms of the ‘size’ of government: the size of the Federal payroll, the Federal budget. Cárdenas has been seen, with some justification, as the initiator of the ‘rise of the active state’.¹¹¹ However, the increase in state spending evident during 1934–40 reflected certain global trends, found among regimes of radically different character; in particular it reflected enhanced economic spending during a phase of economic introversion (evident in the New Deal, the Nazi Four Year Plan, the PNR’s Six Year Plan). It is not clear that the Federal payroll burgeoned, or that there was a sharp aggregate increase in bureaucratic personnel.¹¹² Furthermore, the ‘active state’ continued to rise and rise after 1940: under Ruiz Cortines, for example, the real *per capita* expenditure of the Federal government was 220% what it had been under Cárdenas: did that make the Ruizcortinista administration more than twice as ‘active’ as the Cardenista administration?¹¹³ The gross increase in government spending is clearly significant; but it is only one index among many of the ‘strength’ of the state and it needs to be related, I think, to other, more ‘impressionistic’ (but no less important) criteria.

Two, in particular, should be distinguished. As so often in history, they appear to be contradictory. First, the state may be seen as ‘strong’ to the extent that it survives and reproduces itself, that it does not face mortal challenges to its existence and stability. In this respect, the Mexican state

¹¹⁰ Anguiano Equihua, *Lázaro Cárdenas*, pp. 40–1; Arturo Warman, *Y venimos a contradecir. Los campesinos de Morelos y el estado nacional* (Mexico, 1976), p. 206; Benjamin, *Rich Land, Poor People*, pp. 202–3.

¹¹¹ James W. Wilkie, *The Mexican Revolution: Federal Expenditure and Social Change since 1910* (Berkeley, 1973), pp. 74–81.

¹¹² Merrilee S. Grindle, *Bureaucrats, Politicians and Peasants in Mexico. A Case Study in Public Policy* (Berkeley, 1977), p. 189.

¹¹³ Wilkie, *The Mexican Revolution*, pp. 36–7.

'strengthened' in the course of the 1920s, as successive military rebellions were countered (compare the near-run thing of 1923 with the swift defeat of Escobar in 1929); as relations with the USA improved (the Morrow ambassadorship, 1927–9, being the turning point); and as the revolutionary elites came together to form the PNR in 1929. Thereafter, a certain elite discipline permeated Mexican politics: the 'in' (i.e. the revolutionary) elites increasingly managed their affairs without recourse to fratricidal bloodshed – which did not, of course, rule out a great deal of continued bloodshed at the grassroots, where political factionalism knew no such self-interested restraint. In particular, the military came to see the futility of praetorianism, in which they were encouraged by the United States's inclination to support the established regime in Mexico.¹¹⁴ Revolutionary politics therefore became less red in tooth and claw: the triumphant Cárdenas exiled Calles and did not have him shot (compare Calles's treatment of the revolutionary dissidents of 1927); Cedillo's rebellion was a fiasco in 1938; Almazán's flirtation with rebellion in 1940 was never consummated. The Cárdenas presidency thus further contributed to a process of state-strengthening, at least in the narrow sense of diminishing the risk of outright rebellion and praetorian seizures of the state.

However, this is a narrow and very limited definition. States can survive and reproduce themselves even if (sometimes precisely because) they are weak: Habsburg New Spain would be a classic case. Conversely, states which display executive strength – which flex their political muscles in the social arena, striving to bring about significant changes – may jeopardise their own survival and self-reproduction. That was the risk which Bourbon government ran: it abandoned consensus and adopted far-reaching but provocative reforms.¹¹⁵ The revolutionary governments of the 1920s and 1930s were cast in the Bourbon mould: that is, they, too, sought to change civil society – quite radically, I have argued, in the case of Cardenismo. But, like all Bourbon-style governments, they faced significant opposition: sometimes overt and militant; sometimes more covert and insidious. The first variant was exemplified by Sinarquismo, a movement of major proportions which denied the very legitimacy of the revolutionary state, which propounded an antithetical Catholic integralist

¹¹⁴ Vice-president Henry Wallace attended Avila Camacho's inauguration, thus sounding the 'definite death knell of General Juan Andrew Almazán's presidential hopes' (which were scant already); the Almazanistas demonstrated against Wallace's visit: Rees, Mexico City, to Foreign Office, 14, 29 Nov. 1940, FO 371/24217, 4825, 4880.

¹¹⁵ This echoes an argument put forward in Alan Knight, 'State Power and Political Stability in Mexico', in Neil Harvey (ed.), *Mexico: Dilemmas of Transition* (London, 1993), pp. 29–63.

philosophy, and which aligned itself with those international currents (Falangism in particular) which Cardenismo bitterly opposed.¹¹⁶ This conflict, as I have said, also drew upon traditional symbols and allegiances and represented another bloody round in the ancient battle between clerical conservatism and jacobin secularism; hence there was little room for compromise.

Such an overt challenge could be met head on. The Sinarquistas were beyond the political pale; they did not defer to the Revolution; ultimately (even after they had sloughed off their radical leadership and moderated their integralist intransigence) they were banned by the Avila Camacho administration.¹¹⁷ More significant was the opposition sustained, often *sub rosa*, by groups which chose to resist Cardenismo more subtly, by means of evasion, camouflage and discreet colonisation. James Scott has ingeniously analysed the ‘weapons of the weak’, the humble armoury of peasants who confront their oppressors by means of dissembling, obstruction and non-compliance.¹¹⁸ But we should also recognise these same weapons when deployed by more privileged groups, in response to a radical challenge such as Cardenismo. The ‘weapons of the strong’ were, arguably, the most effective deterrents to the full implementation of the Cardenista project, and the surest guarantee that it would fail.

The enemies of Cardenismo were legion: among the Church hierarchy, Catholic laymen (and, even more, lay women: hence the regime’s renegeing on its commitment to female suffrage), business groups, the universities, landlords, the middle class, foreign investors and – perhaps most important but least noticed – provincial elites (who, of course, embodied several of these overlapping categories). These groups increasingly recognised that the revolutionary state was here to stay, that it made more sense to connive intelligently at its deradicalisation than to strive quixotically for its destruction. This, for example, was the considered conclusion of the Aguila Company in 1935.¹¹⁹ The Church hierarchy, never enthusiastically supportive of the Cristero rebels, welcomed the détente of 1929 and gave little aid or comfort to the Second Cristiada; it welcomed Cárdenas’s mitigation of anticlerical extremism (notably, his sacking of Garrido Canabál), was suspicious of Sinarquista extremism, and, in a smart political stroke, rallied to the regime at the time of the oil expropriation. On that occasion, the bishops offered a tacit deal: patriotic

¹¹⁶ Meyer, *El sinarquismo*, ch. 4.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, ch. 3; Hadow report on Sinarquismo, Washington, 14 Dec. 1944, in FO 371/44478, AN 56.

¹¹⁸ James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven, 1985).

¹¹⁹ Murray, Mexico City, to Foreign Office, 20 June 1935, FO 371/18708, A5546. The British Minister concurred.

support in return for a dilution of Cardenista radicalism (conservatives within the government sought a similar *quid pro quo*).¹²⁰ As usual, the hierarchy was some way ahead of – and more pragmatic than – the Catholic rank-and-file, many of whom were drawn by the messianic intransigence of the Sinarquista Abascal. But the hierarchy caught the wave: within two years president-elect Avila Camacho was publicly declaring himself a Catholic, burying his mother with full Catholic rites, and receiving an enthusiastic welcome in Los Altos de Jalisco.¹²¹ Soon, the socialist education would be wound up (the national press had been berating it for years) and the last glowing embers of official anticlericalism would be doused.¹²² After 1945, as the ideology of the Cold War began to permeate Mexican politics, the Catholic hierarchy could feel justified in its policy of *détente*: the fiftieth anniversary of the coronation of the Virgin of Guadalupe was openly celebrated, with visiting foreign prelates and overt displays of clerical garb and even the yellow and white papal colours; anticlerical protests were few and feeble; the event (anticipating later Catholic jamborees) was positive proof of ‘the fervour of the vast majority of the Mexican people’ (and, we might add, negative proof of the failure of revolutionary *desfanatización*).¹²³ The PAN, reflecting this trend, lost its Falangist tint and emerged in the colours of a pro-business, anti-Communist, Christian Democratic party.

Businessmen and landlords also took up the weapons of the strong, with which to blunt the cutting edge of Cardenismo. They promoted new forms of corporate representation, backed opposition groups (notably the PAN), and displayed the power of their economic veto.¹²⁴ The Monterrey Group, in particular, developed a persuasive ideology of business patriotism, and successfully resisted the inroads of the CTM in Nuevo León, where, as early as 1937, ‘labor supporters appeared to be on the run’ and the CTM had been rendered ‘nearly impotent’.¹²⁵ Avila

¹²⁰ Knight, ‘The Politics of the Expropriation’: Hamilton, *The Limits of State Autonomy*, p. 236.

¹²¹ Rees, Mexico City, to Foreign Office, 9 Feb., 20 Sept. 1940, FO 371/24217, 1654, A4492.

¹²² Victoria Lerner, *Historia de la Revolución Mexicana. Periodo 1934–40. La educación socialista* (Mexico, 1979), pp. 175–92; Medin, *Ideología y praxis*, p. 219.

¹²³ Bateman, Mexico City, to Foreign Office, 15 Jan. 1946, FO 371/51592, AN3382.

¹²⁴ Saragoza, *The Monterrey Elite*, pp. 183, 188–9, 193; Hamilton, *Limits of State Autonomy*, pp. 196–7, 209, 226–7, 235.

¹²⁵ Saragoza, *The Monterrey Elite*, p. 189. The revamped official party, the PRM, also remained a somewhat skeletal organisation in Nuevo León: ‘en realidad no existe P.R.M. en el Estado’, as an official of the state regional committee baldly stated to Cárdenas. See Fructoso Rodríguez to Cárdenas, 3 August 1938, AGN/FLC 543.1/35. The same legajo contains a series of complaints from *campesino* organisations, denouncing the corrupt, conservative regime of Nuevo León Governor Anacleto Guerrero.

Camacho went out of his way to court northeastern business interests who, after 1940, basked in a more congenial climate. If the Monterrey Group was especially successful in combating Cardenismo, other business and landed interests achieved their own less spectacular but no less significant gains.

The Yucatán plantocracy, who, by suborning or assassinating their enemies, had managed to scupper previous efforts at radical reform in the peninsula, now looked to their class defences again. Governor López Cárdenas, a genuine if ineffectual reformer, was cleverly ousted (June 1937) and the whirlwind agrarian reform sponsored by President Cárdenas, vulnerable from the outset by virtue of its hasty improvisation, was subsequently undermined and rolled back. A proposed showcase of agrarismo became a testimony to graft and failure.¹²⁶ Plenty of other landowners, while facing a serious challenge from a revived agrarianism, also managed to survive and, ultimately, prosper. At Atencingo (Puebla), William Jenkins rolled with the agrarista punch and, thanks in part to his good relations with the Avila Camacho family, preserved his sugarmill and the economic power which went with it.¹²⁷ The story was symptomatic of a state where conservative governors were the rule (Maximino Avila Camacho, who succeeded the Callista Mijares Palencia in 1936, was, even in the eyes of conservative foreigners, ‘an unscrupulous reactionary’) and where the socialist education programme had faced dire obstacles and made little headway.¹²⁸ Across the state line in Veracruz, too, landlords like the infamous Manuel Parra survived the challenge of Cardenismo, albeit with greater resort to outright violence.¹²⁹

For many propertied interests, therefore, the pattern was the same: a successful rearguard against Cardenismo during the mid-1930s (roughly, 1934–8); and a sustained revival thereafter. This was made possible by the connivance of political elites (of course, the distinction between ‘propertied interests’ and ‘political elites’ is blurred, especially at the local level). In Tlaxcala, for example, competing *caciques* strove to balance class interests; for a time they had to play the agrarista game, mouthing the rhetoric, even sponsoring a measure of reform; but they also resisted the inroads of the CTM and CNC with some success, thus preserving power

¹²⁶ Benítez, *Ki*, pp. 120–52.

¹²⁷ David Ronfeldt, *Atencingo: The Politics of Agrarian Struggle in a Mexican Ejido* (Stanford, 1973).

¹²⁸ Vaughan, ‘The Implementation of National Policy in the Countryside’; Bateman, Mexico City, to Foreign Office, 20 Dec. 1945, FO 371/51586, AN69.

¹²⁹ Fowler Salamini, *Agrarian Radicalism*, pp. 131–2, 136–7. Parra’s violence, however, would not have been so effective had not the state government (even during the 1930s) adopted an anti-agrarista stance: *ibid.*, p. 131.

in their own hands, and those of their elite allies.¹³⁰ In Chiapas, Governor Victórico Grajales (1932–6) overtly favoured the landed interest and resisted reform, combating central government initiatives with parochial paranoia and assassinating local labour and agrarian leaders.¹³¹ Although the ouster of Grajales led to a significant agrarian reform, the latter soon went the way of co-option: by 1940 a pro-business Governor – and friend of Avila Camacho – was in the saddle and, by the later 1940s, the old mapache/Grajalista clique was back in power. In Sonora, the defeat of the incumbent Callista regime led, ironically, to the installation of a yet more conservative administration, headed by the crafty Obregonista Román Yocupicio. Governor Yocupicio fended off the attacks of the CTM (with considerable success) and gave no support to the socialist education project. As in Chiapas, a significant agrarian reform occurred (in the valleys, not the highlands), but this did not prevent a revival of conservative interests in the 1940s. Structural agrarian change, the product of popular mobilisation, did not doom the regional bourgeoisie; although it forced them to look to their defences and, in some cases, to shift their economic resources from agriculture to industry, commerce and stockraising. Yocupicio's rearguard action presaged a conservative recovery in the 1940s: in 1943 Abelardo Rodríguez, the paragon of official northern conservatism, became governor; Rodriguistas and Callistas controlled Sonora into the 1950s.¹³² In San Luis, where the Cardenistas – President and CTM – carried out a major coup by ousting Cedillo, this did not mean the end of Cedillismo, still less of *caciquismo*: rather, the ensuing political vacuum was filled by a new, more 'modern' *cacique*, Gonzalo Santos, a long-time Cedillista who combined enduring cacical power, landed property, and generally good relations with propertied interests; he even promoted ex-Cedillistas among his coterie of clients.¹³³

¹³⁰ Buvé, 'State Governors and Peasant Mobilization in Tlaxcala'. Compare the swingeing criticism of Saturnino Osornio, the *cacique* of Querétaro, and his violent, corrupt, pseudo-radical henchmen: 'todos... flamantes socialistas, aunque ninguno tiene antecedentes revolucionarios': José Siurob to Cárdenas, n.d. (1935), AGN/FLC 606.3/49.

¹³¹ Armando Ordóñez, Confederación Campesina y Obrera del Estado de Chiapas, Tuxtla, to Múgica, 7 Sept. 1935, AFM, 106/55; Benjamin, *Rich Land, Poor People*, pp. 181–91.

¹³² Aniceto López to Cárdenas, 8 April 1936, AGN/FLC 559.3/25, denounces the 'odiosa camarilla' of Sonoran Callistas, that is, 'nefastos o corrompidos callistas que se hacen pasar por cardenistas disfrazados'. For the full story, see Carlos Moncada O., 'El escenario político de Sonora', in Carlos Martínez Assad (ed.), *Municipios en conflicto* (Mexico, 1985), pp. 31–5 and Adrian Bantjes, 'Politics, Class and Culture in Postrevolutionary Mexico: Cardenismo and Sonora, 1929–40', PhD diss., University of Texas at Austin, 1991.

¹³³ Márquez, 'Gonzalo N. Santos'. See also the report of Col. Miguel Badillo, Tantoyuca, to Cárdenas, 18 June 1938, AGN/FLC 606.3/206, which describes the lusty survival of

So, too, at the local level elsewhere. At San José (Michoacán) the landlord party took control of the *municipio* in 1936 and consolidated itself during the early 1940s; in Arandas, the local oligarchy recovered direct control of the *municipio* in the 1940s.¹³⁴

This consistent pattern of ‘bourgeois’ recovery followed – and was made possible – by the inner logic of Cardenismo. As we have argued, Cardenismo was a broad church. In ousting Calles, Cárdenas had had to cut deals right and left. For a time, the tide had run for radicalism; even conservative figures within the political establishment had to conform, had to flaunt a spurious radicalism. But they remained in office, in state governorships and municipal presidencies. During the mid-1930s, radical critics regularly complained of the presence of conservatives (usually labelled ‘Callista’, but such labels, as I have suggested, are somewhat shifting and misleading): in the Ministry of Fomento; in a host of states (and territories, such as Quintana Roo); in the municipalities; and among the military (where, apart from the celebrated cases of Almazán, generals like Pablo Quiroga and Alejandro Manje enjoyed the reputation of being pro-business and pro-Church).¹³⁵ The Cardenista regime, in other words, was colonised by a host of ‘charlatans and sunflowers’ (*saltambiques y girasoles*), tactical converts from the ‘Callista mafia’.¹³⁶ After 1938, as the sun moved across the political sky, from left to right, the sunflowers

Cedillistas among the municipal authorities and local (military) reserves of the region, who ‘se han acogido la protección del Senador Gonzalo N. Santos a quién reconocen como jefe’.

¹³⁴ González, *Pueblo en vilo*, p. 186; Martínez Saldaña, ‘Formación y transformación de una oligarquía’, p. 71. Not that Arandas was ever a hotbed of reform: see the report of Miguel Morones of the Vanguardia Cardenista Arandense, 28 Feb. 1938, AGN/DGG 2.311.6(11), caja 253, t. I, on the efforts of the municipal authorities ‘hasta para entorpecer cualquier intento o esfuerzo de que las leyes obreras y agrarias tengan efectividad’.

¹³⁵ Reports to Múgica from J. Hernández Solís, 2 Jan. 1934; anon., 2 July 1936; anon., Dolores Hidalgo, Gto, 12 Aug. 1935; José Berger, Guadalajara, 10 Oct. 1935; AFM 106/5, 181, 15, 81. Compare also Ignacio Tovar, Cd Victoria, Tamps., to Emilio Portes Gil, 24 April 1936, AGN, Emilio Portes Gil, Archivo Particular, caja 68, exp. 5; José Moreno, Tehuacán, Pue., to Cárdenas, 24 April 1936, AGN/DGG, 2.311.8, caja 35A (‘todavía impera en esta región un reducto del viejo callismo refundido dentro del [partido] laborista’). At the time of Mexico’s entry into the Second World War, Manje (still termed a ‘Callista’) was one of the three ranking generals, commanding the Gulf coast zone: Davidson, Mexico City, to Foreign Office, 17 Jan. 1944, FO 371/38302, AN 927. Manje was said to have connived not only with the Cristeros (Berger report) but also with hacienda white guards in Jalisco: Jorge Regalado, ‘Los agraristas’, in Laura Patricia Romero (coord.), *Jalisco desde la revolución: Movimientos sociales, 1929–40*, t. IV (Guadalajara, 1988), pp. 140–1. On the continued influence of the (Callista) Riva Palacio faction in the state of Mexico, see the numerous petitions (c. Jan. 1936) in AGN/DGG 2/311 M (12) 21545, caja 20B.

¹³⁶ Felizardo Frías to Múgica (report on Sonora), 29 Oct. 1935, AGN/FLC, 559.3/25.

faithfully followed it; for them, the Cardenista regime was less a cause to be championed than an interlude to be survived.

Thus, the rollback of Cardenismo proved rapid and successful. At the Federal level, the Avila Camacho and Alemán administrations set about changing personnel in the Congress, the party, the statehouses and the unions: Avila Camacho gradually (Cardenismo, though in decline, was far from dead), Alemán (who not only engineered the celebrated *charrazos* but also presided over a major turnover of political office) brusquely and decisively.¹³⁷ The Cardenista/Lombardista belief that the popular organisations of the 1930s – notably the CTM – could successfully carry the torch into and beyond the 1940s began to look distinctly naïve. Wartime collaboration with the USA gave way to Cold War rhetoric and practice: the promised – or feared – Cardenista comeback never happened, not in 1952, perhaps its last best chance.¹³⁸

This change in political personnel (or, in some cases, a return of older personnel) paralleled the well-known shift in policy and ideology which Mexico experienced during the 1940s. As historians have clearly demonstrated, this shift was under way well before Cárdenas left office.¹³⁹ Between 1938 and 1940, facing serious economic difficulties and political challenges, the administration retrenched. It reined in its reforms and cut its social expenditure; in consequence, it alienated many of its erstwhile supporters and the bruising 1940 presidential campaign was marked by the wholesale disillusionment and defection of Cardenista forces – including trade unionists and *ejidatarios* – to the Almazanista opposition. Rhetoric was moderated along with policy and Cárdenas allowed (it does not seem that he actively engineered) the succession of a middle-of-the-road PRMista, whose own campaign rhetoric was largely indistinguishable from that of his conservative opponent.¹⁴⁰

Contemporaries were well aware that an ideological sea change was taking place. Dirigisme and collectivism, the staple of 1930s political economy, were increasingly being called into question; their protagonists were losing confidence, their critics were gaining heart. Foreign observers were glad to report that ‘the great majority of thinking people in Mexico are now sick of socialism’, hence it could be confidently predicted that ‘the trend over the next few years will be to the right’.¹⁴¹ Luis Montes de

¹³⁷ González, *Pueblo en vilo*, p. 206, quoting Salvador Novo on the political turnover of 1946. Luis Medina, *Historia de la Revolución Mexicana, Periodo 1940–52. Civilismo y modernización del autoritarismo* (Mexico, 1979), pioneers analysis of this crucial period.

¹³⁸ Unless 1988 counts.

¹³⁹ Hamilton, *Limits of State Autonomy*, ch. 8; Albert L. Michaels, ‘The Crisis of Cardenismo’, *Journal of Latin American Studies*, vol. 2 (1970), pp. 51–79.

¹⁴⁰ González, *Los días del Presidente Cárdenas*, p. 259.

¹⁴¹ Davidson, Mexico City, to Foreign Office, 4 Jan. 1940, FO 371/24217, A813.

Oca, head of the Banco de México, rejoiced that 'Communism in Mexico is dying'.¹⁴² As the war years went by, erstwhile Cardenista ideologues seemed to lose their bearings. Efrén Buenrostro, head of Pemex in 1944, was 'very much chastened by events'; Ramón Beteta, who, as late as 1938, had sounded like some radical Narodnik, promising that Mexico could bypass the evils of capitalism, was by 1947 serving as Finance Minister under Miguel Alemán.¹⁴³

This ideological shift was in part the product of inexorable international trends. Save for a brief hiatus in 1939–41, the Comintern advocated popular frontism, and the submersion of Communist parties in progressive 'bourgeois' regimes. More important, the war linked the Mexican economy to the North American to an unprecedented extent. Wartime economic collaboration boosted industry, provoked inflation, and required the disciplining of organised labour.¹⁴⁴ Finally, the Cold War legitimised attacks on Communists, and even Cardenistas. But domestic factors, too, were crucial in bringing about this major political reorientation. Cardenistas was ousted – and to a degree discredited – because opponents both within the party and without were able to marshal powerful support; and because the Cardenista coalition itself fragmented, losing supporters and forfeiting its morale. Perhaps this outcome was inevitable, the result of inherent contradictions, as the movement tried to reform a 'dependent capitalist' society without incurring major revolutionary confrontations, and as it tried to solve the problems of production and distribution at the same time.¹⁴⁵ But, whether inevitable or simply probable, the ultimate failure of Cardenismo had a lot to do with its inherent weaknesses – which neither supporters nor opponents liked to trumpet. Supporters, of course, liked to claim that history was on their side (very likely they believed it). Opponents, setting explanatory precedents which a later generation of historians would faithfully follow, denounced the 'totalitarian' character of Cardenismo, its undemocratic, interventionist, juggernaut character. In my view, both fomented illusions. Cardenismo was a much weaker vehicle for change than either supporters or opponents claimed. This is not to say, of course, that its reformist record was negligible. On the contrary, the Cardenista regime wrought decisive changes: agrarian and labour reform (for which it could count on decisive popular support); the nationalisation of the petroleum industry; the reorganisation of the governing party. But the

¹⁴² Memo. of conversation of Fletcher, British Embassy, Washington, and E. D. Ruiz, ex-consul-general of Mexico in the US, 5 Aug. 1940, FO 371/24217, 3818.

¹⁴³ Sanford A. Mosk, *Industrial Revolution in Mexico* (Berkeley, 1950), p. 58.

¹⁴⁴ Niblo, 'The Impact of War'.

¹⁴⁵ Hamilton, *Limits of State Autonomy*, p. 285. Similar criticisms have been levelled at the Bolivian revolution.

eventual outcome of these policies departed from the goals which Cardenista policy-makers pursued (in some cases the departure became evident even before 1940). After 1940, the key institutions of Cardenismo – the *ejido* and the socialist school; the CTM, CNC, and PRM; Pemex and the National Railways – hardly fulfilled the radical high hopes of the mid-1930s; nor, to put it another way, did they realise the lively fears of businessmen and conservatives. The institutional shell of Cardenismo remained, but its internal dynamic was lost. In other words, the jalopy was hi-jacked by new drivers; they retuned the engine, took on new passengers, and then drove it in a quite different direction.