

This book successfully answers the question what did women think and do in postrevolutionary Mexico. Based on extensive research into previously unused sources, it eliminates the idea that women were passive or indifferent to their living conditions or status. Instead, it skillfully illuminates the multiple layers of women's political involvement in strikes, congresses, land takeovers, campaigns for corn mills, maternity clinics, the temperance movement, and the struggle for suffrage. By focusing on women's political mobilizations and demands, this book represents a major step forward in the efforts of historians to accurately portray the complexity of postrevolutionary Mexico by including the activities and ideas of the diverse political actors who shaped it.

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JENNIFER BICKHAM MENDEZ: *From the Revolution to the Maquiladoras: Gender, Labor, and Globalization in Nicaragua*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005.

“Jobs, Yes... But with Dignity!”

(Political slogan quoted in Mendez, p. 155)

Nicaragua's Working and Unemployed Women's Movement is a particularly apt organization to consider in the context of the neoliberal post-Sandinista period. Known as MEC, after union organizer María Elena Cuadra, the women who formed the group in 1994 have struggled to retain their commitment to the labor and populist social base of the CST, the Sandinista party's workers organization from which they emerged. Yet they have also sought to counter the party's male-dominated verticalism that was dismissive of their efforts to address gender issues. The founding members of MEC paid a heavy price as the Sandinista CST accused them of disloyalty and mismanagement, and withheld its support to working women. MEC has overcome many challenges within Nicaragua and beyond, gradually winning national recognition and transnational support for their efforts on behalf of working women.

Jennifer Bickham Mendez offers a well balanced and highly readable case study of MEC, which stands at the crossroads of several social constructions that are too often seen as binaries: labor movement and women's movement, new social movement and nongovernmental organization (NGO), and workplace organizing and household activism. MEC's principal activity has focused on bettering the conditions of women working in the *maquilas*, the foreign-owned factories located in Nicaragua's Free Trade Zone (FTZ). The organization has needed to walk a fine line between too harsh a critique of the multinationals, which they fear could result in loss of jobs for women, and too accommodating

a stance, which has meant less support from the labor movement as well as from transnational social activists who favor boycotts of maquila-produced consumer goods and other forms of confrontational politics.

Mendez first encountered MEC at the time when the founders were parting ways with the Sandinista CST, but her emphasis is on a few years later, the period between 1996 and 1997, when she carried out research and also volunteered as an international *cooperante* with the organization. She found herself both insider and outsider, privy to much of the day-to-day activity of MEC, yet still a *gringa* whose participation was understood as short-term and substantively different from that of the working-class women who lived the experience of the *maquiladoras*. To her credit, she enriches her work by sharing some of the illuminating moments when her status *vis-à-vis* MEC was called into question by members of the organization. If there was some ambiguity in her role, it is nonetheless evident that she worked closely as an engaged scholar-activist, whose contribution to MEC and its struggle for social justice was valued.

A considerable strength of this book is its attention to the everyday forms of both cooperation and dissension that have characterized the left and women's organizations in Nicaragua since the 1990s. Mendez captures the serious oversights of Sandinista politics as well as harsh measures during the post-Sandinista period, and notes the frequent invocations of "before" and "after" 1990, which marked the departure of the revolutionary government and the entry of neoliberal government. She is persuasive in calling for an examination of the situation of women workers in the FTZs, who were a small but significant part of the labor force at about 40,000 employees in 1994, as these workers stand at the intersection of gender, class, and transnational politics. As she argues, MEC offers an exceptionally fine illustration of the subtle ways in which women coming out of the militant, masculinist tradition of Sandinismo have needed to at once claim a more feminist identity and a more professional one if they are to attract international financial support in the neoliberal era. Invoking their location as "traditional" Nicaraguan women, they at times deployed a sort of "strategic essentialism," calling on the state to protect women workers as poor single mothers and reproducers of the nation, even as they demanded gender equality. Navigating these waters has been daunting, with internal disagreement within MEC (some members returned to the CST), feminist disagreement over gender politics, and transnational questioning of whether MEC is "grassroots enough" or has become overly professionalized. Mendez presents the various sides of these discussions in their full complexity, though her admiration for MEC's non-party politics remains clear.

If there is any disappointing aspect in this work, it is in the heavy introduction of the subject with too much assertion of the importance of the MEC case study,

without as much ethnographic material offered to demonstrate why this might be so. We are gradually introduced to several women in MEC's leadership, but we do not come to know them as fully developed characters in the MEC story. Thus, while the narrative promises much, in the end the case material seems to be outweighed by excessive explanation of what we should take away from it. Moreover, for all the attention to this brief but significant period in recent Nicaraguan history, it is surprising that we hear only in passing of the allegations of sexual abuse made in 1998 against Sandinista leader Daniel Ortega that further divided the left, largely along gender lines (p. 202).

A broad issue at stake in this timely study concerns women's efforts to win citizenship rights, articulated by MEC through discourses of human rights. As part of a wider network of Central American women calling for new "laboring subjects" to promote "globalization from below" (p. 150), MEC stands to have an important voice in the future. Mendez's final chapter offers a brief update on MEC, and it is encouraging to hear that despite the many obstacles the organization has had to overcome, it has flourished in recent years. Her suggestion that MEC's feminist vision may be capable of producing social transformation will no doubt be put to the test in years to come. As a feminist ethnography of globalization, this book serves up ample food for thought and discussion. I intend to adopt it in my course on Gender and Cultural Politics in Latin America. Other scholars and students in anthropology, women's studies, and Latin American studies should likewise find it very useful.

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CHRISTINE AYORINDE: *Afro-Cuban Religiosity, Revolution, and National Identity*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2004.

The topic of Ayorinde's book is timely considering the public emergence of Afro-Cuban religions during the years since the collapse of Communist Eastern Europe and the ensuing economic crisis in Cuba. While a number of studies have approached Afro-Cuban ethnicity from historical and (to a lesser extent) sociological perspectives, Ayorinde's book offers an account of the political significance of Afro-Cuban cultural heritage in the historical formation of Cuban national identity. Her investigation focuses on the political motivations underlying the "selective promotion" of Afro-Cuban religions by governments from the colonial era to the present day.