

PAUL L. HABER: *Power from Experience. Urban Popular Movements in Late Twentieth Century Mexico*. Philadelphia: Pennsylvania University Press, 2006.

Paul Haber's book, *Power from Experience*, is the result of ten years of extensive field-work within the complex network of political and civic associations in two of Mexico's largest cities: Mexico City and Durango. Combining the richness of oral sources with an acute understanding of theory, this book is situated at the crossroads between contemporary history, anthropology, and the social sciences.

Haber rightly claims that the electoral overthrow of Mexico's longest lasting authoritarian regime in July 2000 cannot be properly understood without an accounting of the significant role played by the mobilization of the urban poor during the previous three decades, the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. *Power from Experience* therefore sets out to explain the forms such mobilization took within the authoritarian, yet evolving, regimes of presidents Luis Echeverría (1970-1976) and López Portillo (1976-1982). It shows how the social movements born out of those years survived the highly repressive years of President Miguel de la Madrid Hurtado (1982-1988), and finally, how such movements were affected by the more conciliatory policies of President Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988-1994).

A second claim central to Haber's thesis is that those democratic social movements born through the cooperation of university students, low level political activists, and the urban poor tended to wither during the transitional phase of democratization. Once political parties and holding public office became viable options, movement leaders often turned their attention to playing a new democratic game. *Power from Experience*, therefore, also explores "what the transformation from urban low-income movement to party politics has meant for the country's democratic transition and its future consolidation."

Haber examines the formation and evolution of two social movements of the Mexican urban poor: the Popular Defense Committee (CDP) of Durango and the Assembly of Neighborhoods (AB) of Mexico City. The book moves between an analysis of the "phenomenology of the movement" and a narrative of the changes in institutional behavior. While the latter is largely examined through the use of archival and public records the former draws on the testimonies of those who experienced the life of the movement first-hand: its members and professional advisors, such as lawyers, architects, and journalists.

*Power from Experience* is structured around three central axes. Chapters 1-3 provide the reader with a theoretical and historical overview of the Mexican case and a more general study of popular social movements in rapidly urbanized and

industrialized societies. Chapters 4-5 focus on the formation and consolidation of both the CDP of Durango and AB of Mexico City in the years prior to Mexico's long transition to democracy. Finally chapter 6 looks at both organizations and their relation to the state during the years of latent transition.

Within the context of the existing literature on popular social movements Paul Haber's work contributes to a more complex understanding of the way participation in popular social movements affected the lives of the urban poor. In the Mexican case, while popular social movements in no way came near to revolutionizing the neoliberal system, they did shift the perceptions of members concerning their status as citizens and legitimate interlocutors that the state had to notice. As such they were able to fashion for themselves the political tools and the socio-cultural discourse necessary to carry on the struggle for concrete programs that would mitigate economic marginalization. Perhaps the study's major weakness is that despite the many references to the transformative influence of movement life it makes only a few specific allusions to the way participating in the movement affected the perceptions of gender, class, and community in the everyday life of its members.

By exploring the way organization building could coexist with continued social mobilization during specific periods in a movement's life, Haber demonstrates the need for future research that would focus on the details of what specific forms of organization building imply for specific types of mass mobilizations.

Finally, Haber draws a clear distinction between the two central goals of popular social movements: the first goal is to engage in and reformulate national and local politics; the second goal is to produce new frameworks of social and cultural meaning. Despite the many testimonies cited throughout the book proving that the CDP of Durango and the AB of Mexico City are central to the production of new frameworks of meaning, Haber refers only briefly to these transformations and the manner in which they took place. While Haber explains his focus by contending that the Mexican movements themselves were more inclined towards political action than the production of meaning, he creates far too neat a dichotomy between the two goals. This in its turn obscures the fact that it is the creation of new meaning that assists one to negotiate effective political intervention, while the process of political intervention, in its turn, generates new social and cultural meaning.