

A Pueblo Divided: Business, Property, and Community in Papantla, Mexico. By Emilio Kourí. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004. xiii + 389 pp. Maps, tables, figures, appendix, bibliography, notes, index. Cloth, \$60.00. ISBN: 0-804-73939-0.

Reviewed by Edward Beatty

A Pueblo Divided is a fantastic book: the long-awaited product of assiduous research that immediately sets the standard for all future work on rural Mexico. Emilio Kourí tells the story of the vanilla boom in the Papantla region of Veracruz, Mexico, and the way the new opportunities it created intertwined with efforts to privatize community lands and ultimately fractured community interests. Whether your interest lies in a social history of rural Mexico, the dynamic impact of a commodity export boom on local communities, the politics of the *Porfiriato* (1876–1911), or the privatization of traditional community land rights, this book delivers. Monographs don't come much better.

Kourí begins his story with a rich and savory natural history of vanilla, from its ecology and collection by indigenous peoples in the eastern foothills of Mexico's Sierra Madre Oriental, along the northern edge of the state of Veracruz, to its European consumption as an exquisitely flavorful additive. Assiduously researched and richly told, this narrative is every bit the equal of accounts by Sidney Mintz or Fernando Ortiz. The indigenous Totonac and other Mesoamerican societies had long used the fermented fruit of the tropical vanilla orchid to flavor chocolate and other foods. European consumption depended almost entirely on Mexican exports until the second half of the nineteenth century, when accelerating demand fueled vanilla plantations on the island of Reunión. Mexican production grew apace, led by Papantla and its environs.

Vanilla, the Veracruz environment, and the social relations of the Totonac communities around Papantla provide the context for the central thread of the book: the privatization of communal lands and their division into parcels. This is arguably *the* central story of rural Mexico in the nineteenth century, and in most

tellings it becomes the most explosive source of the Mexican Revolution. In a nutshell, the conventional story argues that Mexican Liberals at midcentury enacted legislation to privatize the communally held lands of indigenous communities. Enforcement, however, did not come about until the economic repercussions of the export boom beginning in the 1870s increased local land values in many regions. Competition for land between traditional villages and export-oriented estates (*haciendas*) was typically won by the latter, which had preferential access to capital, to political influence, and to the use of extra-legal force. Privatization laws undermined village attempts to defend their lands, while the estate owners' (*hacendados*) ambitions promoted the enforcement of the legislation. The result was "the rape of the pueblo." This story has, of course, long been one of Mexico's most polemically argued, as well as one of its most neglected by researchers. *A Pueblo Divided* demonstrates that the process was far more complex and contingent than the classic story. For the Totonac of Papantla, free land had long been a birthright, but the vanilla business and new opportunities provided a catalyst for entrepreneurial residents and outsiders alike. Yes, the ensuing efforts to claim and defend land rights were almost always lengthy and fraught with conflict, and the peace that followed was brutally imposed, but initiatives for privatization came as often from within the community as from without. Totonacs were both advocates of privatization and defenders of traditional arrangements. Local conditions mattered profoundly: demographic trends; the physical environment; living and farming patterns; economic markets for vanilla, credit, and land; and power politics at every level. The state, moreover, played no monolithic or consistent role on the matter. Kourí pays close attention to the shifting centers of political influence and the personal inclinations and attitudes of officeholders, from local power brokers to mayors and town councils to the *jefes políticos* to the governors and ultimately to President Porfirio Díaz in Mexico City.

Instead of the stark village-versus-hacienda dichotomy in the oft-told tale, the fault lines of conflict in Papantla cut across ethnic and community lines. Kourí vividly depicts the ways in which members of the community staked out sharply varying positions on the land issue. While these often corresponded to profound

differences in economic positions within the community, they were also shaped by external political relations as well as by the often venal or speculative aims of many who sought to wring the most from the vanilla boom. Inequities characterized the outcome of parcelization, as merchants, land speculators, semi-independent *rancheros*, and a handful of powerful Totonac men acquired some of the best lands. Papantla experienced a fundamental transition from a society of independent farmers to a highly commercialized and rigidly hierarchical society. Nevertheless, Kourí reports that “despite the rapacity that so often characterized this land-tenure reform, more than two thousand [Totonac] individuals and families whose primary occupation was subsistence-oriented agriculture had managed to emerge as landowners,” although nearly half the Totonac families were left landless (pp. 279–80).

Two questions lurk at the edges of this compelling and engrossing story. In the end, did the economic logic of rising land prices during the export boom and Porfirian politics make the swirling flow of local conflict irrelevant and privatization inevitable? Probably so, although stopping here has long led us to misunderstand the variegated nature of rural communities and their complex relations with political authority. Kourí shows us that what happened between the known states of communal and privatized land is not only fascinating but also essential to understanding the emergence of modern Mexico. Second, is this a typical case? Yes, we get a vivid portrayal here of the Papantla experience, but what can it tell us about the way privatization played out across the Mexican landscape in the late-nineteenth century? Kourí is too good a historian to suggest that this case might be a model for all others, but he does argue implicitly that many of the factors that tug and pull and tear at Papantla’s community fabric were likely having a similar impact in rural communities affected by commercial expansion. Few cases end up fitting the conventional bipolar view of villages united against rapacious external foes. From Anenecuilco in Morelos to Naranja in Michoacan and Namiquipa in Chihuahua, conflicts over land likely played out in far more complex ways than current histories reveal.

For business historians interested in the impact of global commodity trade in the nineteenth century, this book provides an exceptionally detailed model of how commodity-based commercialization dramatically reshapes incentives and interests in producing regions. It also provides detailed accounts of each link in vanilla's "commodity chain," between the orchids of Papantla and transatlantic consumer markets, as well as data on trade flows and vanilla prices. I took one final measure of this book's value during the profitable hour I spent working through the bibliography. Few sources were left unplumbed, and the result is a work of tremendous value for future scholars across a wide range of disciplines and fields.

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