

The Ecology of Oil: Environment, Labor, and the Mexican Revolution, 1900–1938. By *Myrna I. Santiago*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006. xiv + 411 pp. Figures, bibliography, notes, index. Cloth, \$85.00. ISBN: 978-0-521-86324-7.

Reviewed by Marcelo Bucheli

Over the course of the past two decades, the world reached a consensus on the need to offset the negative effects of oil consumption and production on the natural environment. The debate over the environmental impact of the oil industry has shifted from concerns about endangered animals and plant species to fears about the destabilizing effects of environmental destruction on world politics and economics. Only recently have world leaders and members of the scientific community concurred that environmental destruction can exacerbate poverty and lead to political instability, particularly in poor countries. Against this background, Myrna Santiago's well-written and rigorously researched book is particularly welcome.

Santiago has chosen the oil-producing region of Huasteca in Veracruz, Mexico, for her historical exploration of the impact of environmental change on a local society. To prepare her account, she consulted a wide range of primary sources from different institutions around the world. Her study spans the years between the birth of the oil industry in the late nineteenth century and the Mexican government's expropriation of its foreign assets in 1938. Like Fernand Braudel, whose work—curiously—she does not mention, she considers the natural environment and its transformations through the centuries as having been the main determinant of social and political relations. In line with this view, Santiago argues that the environmental upheaval generated by the oil industry deeply affected social and political relations in the Huasteca and provoked continuing resistance from the local population. Accordingly, the people who lived there sought to protect their independence and ensure their survival by resisting the encroachment of this external agent.

In establishing the nineteenth-century beginnings of the Huastecan people's struggle to protect their environment, Santiago points out that the Liberal governments of that time viewed

the jungle as unexplored territory ripe for rational exploitation. The indigenous population, by holding on to their communal land-tenure system and maintaining their coexistence with the rainforest, managed to resist attempts by large landowners to insert the rainforest into the capitalist economy. Their efforts proved less successful against the oil companies, which arrived in the region at the turn of the century. Rather than resorting to violence to remove the local population from the oil fields, the companies undermined the inhabitants' resolve and cohesiveness with offers of cash. Foreign investors like Weetman Pearson and Henri Deterding created the first real-estate market in the region by buying the lands of the small holding communities and large landholders for their company towns and oil operations. The infusion of money and the sudden demand for labor created a proletarian class composed of indigenous inhabitants and new arrivals from other parts of Mexico. By investing in the region, the foreign corporations changed not only the natural environment but also the human one: the "new masters" built oil towns in which the wage differentials were determined by racial background. The companies also tried to duplicate the foreign employees' home environments by constructing towns whose architecture and vegetation resembled the buildings and plants of Britain and the United States.

The impact of the oil investments on the natural environment was detrimental to the welfare of the local population. In her third chapter, Santiago recounts in detail how the swamps and rainforest were destroyed, causing pollution and health problems among the inhabitants. She supports these descriptions with data from the companies and accounts by local figures and travelers. Photographs by the companies' geologists of polluted rivers and fires burning uncontrolled in the oilfields make the story even more compelling.

Labor activism in the Mexican oilfields during the 1920s, according to Santiago, occurred not only in reaction to the companies' racism and imposition of harsh working conditions, but also in response to their destruction of the environment. She does not succumb to the temptation to portray the Mexican oil workers as early environmental activists, but instead shows how the destruction of their surroundings pushed the workers to take action in order to protect their own interests.

The revolutionary government's relative neglect of the oil workers' problems during the 1920s did not deter the workers from pushing for a nationalistic agenda. In chapter six, Santiago describes how the oil workers became leaders, rather than acting simply as allies of President

Lázaro Cárdenas during the events that led to the nationalization of oil in 1938. In fact, Santiago argues, Cárdenas nationalized the industry only reluctantly and in response to pressure from the workers, who had created the conditions that allowed him to expropriate the companies. By mobilizing the population of Veracruz in their struggle against the multinationals, the workers succeeded in portraying themselves as patriots in a battle against the foreigners who were robbing Mexicans of their natural wealth. Under these conditions, support for the companies would have been politically costly. However, Santiago does not connect these events with the ongoing environmental destruction as clearly as she does in other chapters.

The Ecology of Oil will be obligatory reading for students of relations among multinational corporations, local societies, and the natural environment in underdeveloped countries. Obvious as it may sound, relations between capital and labor do not occur in a vacuum. Extractive industries in general (and the oil industry in particular) have a powerful, lasting impact on the natural environment that necessarily affects the actors living and operating within it. This is an aspect of the expansion of multinational corporations that historians cannot afford to neglect.

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