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(Review) The Illusion of Civil Society: Democratization and Community Mobilization in Low-Income Mexico

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Jon Shefner, *The Illusion of Civil Society: Democratization and Community Mobilization in Low-Income Mexico* (University Park PA: Penn State University Press, 2008), pp. xiv+224, \$55.00, hb.

ROBERT GAY

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companies, local production of medications by public and private laboratories, and for the first time in 2007, the use of compulsory licensing (referred to as ‘breaking the patent’ and permissible in Brazilian law if a patent holder abuses their rights, for example by not manufacturing the patented product) for an antiretroviral drug.

With the Foreword written by former Brazilian President Fernando Henrique Cardoso (who signed the 1996 law mandating that all HIV-positive Brazilians should be treated free of charge in the public health system) and Francisco Bastos (a prominent Brazilian AIDS researcher), Nunn’s book captures the reader’s attention with an unbiased analysis of the development of the Brazilian treatment response to the AIDS epidemic. As poetically mentioned by Bastos, Nunn’s collaboration with Brazilian research institutions was a successful one, and follows the centuries-long Brazilian tradition of attracting ‘traveller-scientists’.

Nunn’s study explains the *process* by which Brazil’s AIDS treatment institutions developed, but the result of her work is more than this. For the reader acquainted with the literature on the AIDS epidemic in Brazil, this book will be like seeing a familiar painting being restored – all the details were there before, but after the restoration new colours and textures come to life. Those not familiar with the present literature will learn by the Brazilian example how national HIV/AIDS policies (when properly implemented) can change the life of a country’s citizens and have the potential to influence the field of global health by showing that positive outcomes are possible when access to health is understood as a human right.

International Women’s Health Coalition

JANE GALVÃO

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Jon Shefner, *The Illusion of Civil Society: Democratization and Community Mobilization in Low-Income Mexico* (University Park PA: Penn State University Press, 2008), pp. xiv + 224, \$55.00, hb.

Jon Shefner has written a delightful book about local politics in a squatter settlement in the neighbourhood of Cerro del Cuatro on the outskirts of Guadalajara, Mexico. His focus is on the activities of the *Unión de Colonos Independientes* (UCI), a grassroots neighbourhood association charged with pressuring the state for urban services such as land ownership, water and sewerage. Shefner conducted the bulk of his fieldwork between 1991 and 1994, and then went back numerous times until his last, brief visit in 2006. As a consequence, he knows his research site well and is able to provide a long-term perspective on changes associated with this particularly interesting and critical juncture in Mexican politics.

Shefner’s study is set in the context to two broad-scale trends. The first is globalisation, which has resulted in a deterioration of local economic conditions and a reduction in the services that are offered by the state. The second is the emergence of so-called civil society in opposition to the state, framed and fuelled by liberation theology. Both globalisation and the emergence of civil society, Shefner maintains, represent a challenge to the time-honoured system of political-interest representation known as clientelism. Clientelism is usually defined as an exchange of votes for favours, wherein political parties – in this case, the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (PRI) – make urban services available on the basis of support at the polls. Globalisation represents a challenge to clientelism because it reduces the resources that can be used to buy people off, so to speak, and as a consequence, opens the

door to organisations such as the UCI that seek to establish a new relationship with political parties and the state based on a discourse not of favours but of rights.

Shefner examines whether over the long term the UCI has been successful in terms of the delivery of urban services and the consolidation and extension of democracy. The answer to the first part of the question, regarding urban services, is a resounding yes. At least during the early period of his research, the UCI was able to mobilise and collectively organise local residents in ways that forced the state to respond, in terms of the delivery of much-needed urban services. The answer to the second part of the question is more ambiguous. Financed and supported by outside allies in civil society, the leadership of the UCI attempted to engage local residents in debates at the national level and to involve them in party organising and elections. The attempt to link local and national struggles backfired, however, for three reasons. First, because in the minds of local residents the UCI compromised its autonomy and independence by throwing in its lot with one of the two opposition parties to the PRI. Second, because it placed on the back burner issues that were most important to local residents, which continued to be the provision of urban services. And third, because it created a divide between the leadership of the UCI and its allies, and the rank-and-file members of the neighbourhood, which in turn led to a dramatic and permanent decline in the UCI's effectiveness and standing.

One of the most interesting parts of the book is Shefner's discussion of the Solidarity programme, devised by the PRI to shore up its rapidly declining support. Shefner shows how popular awareness and rejection of clientelist-style politics forced the PRI to dress up and market this public works programme very differently, while at the same time appealing to the very same local and decidedly material interests. He also demonstrates how the programme generated a struggle between local and national elements within the PRI to control the distribution of resources and votes, and how the defeat of the PRI at the hands of the *Partido Acción Nacional* (PAN) brought little or no improvement or change to the region. This was partly because of the further decline in the amount of resources available to the state, but also because the PAN did not make much effort to fill the local political spaces that had been occupied for so long by the PRI – such that by the end of the book the reader is left with the impression that while things were bad when the PRI was the only game in town, at least there was a game in town!

The other interesting thing about this book, as already mentioned, is that it offers a long-term perspective. The research for the book was conducted over a period of 15 years, and the book would arguably have been very different, and far less interesting and convincing, if it were based only on the initial period of research. What this book tells us is that just as social movements have life cycles, people have life cycles too, and these determine and limit their willingness and capacity to engage in protest; people grow old, they get sick, they lose their jobs, and they grow disillusioned. And so in the last few pages there is an account of the author walking around 'his' neighbourhood with one of the last standing members of the group of militants he had befriended and followed so closely, reflecting on the career not just of the UCI but also of his activist friends and neighbours. In many people's hands, this narrative would have been handled badly; in Shefner's hands, however, it brings the book to a very personal and poignant close.

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