

## The Mexican Heartland: How Communities Shaped Capitalism, a Nation, and World History, 1500-2000

**Review Number:** 2313

**Publish date:** Thursday, 14 March, 2019

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**ISBN:** 9780691174365

**Date of Publication:** 2017

**Price:** £30.00

**Pages:** 512pp.

**Publisher:** Princeton University Press

**Publisher url:** <https://press.princeton.edu/titles/11125.html>

**Place of Publication:** Princeton

**Reviewer:** Nathaniel Morris

It is an ambitious book that would try to cover the Conquest of Mexico, the rise and fall of the country's hacienda system, the emergence of the Virgen de Guadalupe, the intricacies of Emiliano Zapata's role in the Mexican Revolution, and the exodus of women from rural regions in the mid-1960s to look for work as 'household help' in the nation's fast-growing capital city. But John Tutino, professor of history and international affairs at Georgetown University, does not just stop there in his new book, a 500-page tome covering 500 years of social, political, and economic change. At the same time as giving us a fine-grained, politico-economic history of the highlands that ring Mexico City, Tutino's book is an analysis of the economic foundations of patriarchy, a study of the violence engendered by extreme inequality, and a history of world capitalism, which in its first pages critiques Marx and Braudel (pp. 3–5), and in its epilogue name-checks NAFTA, Trump, the Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street, and the work of radical economist Thomas Piketty (p. 411).

Over thirteen intervening chapters, Tutino sets out to explore the 'largest processes of capitalism ... in their global dimensions,' while concurrently investigating 'its social and cultural realities ... in local detail' (p.10). Tutino's local case studies are mostly centred on the 'Mexican Heartland' of the title, which includes parts of the centrally located states of Morelos, Hidalgo, and the Estado de México. This region – made up of fertile lake-basins, sub-tropical valleys and arid hills, and traditionally inhabited by Nahuatl- and Otomí-speaking peoples – was the breadbasket (or rather 'tortilla basket') of the Aztec Empire, home to the peasants and the traders who put food on the tables of Tenochtitlán. After the arrival of the Spaniards, the region's communities were re-organised into autonomous 'Indian Republics' by missionaries and colonial administrators, but continued to feed the city now known as 'México', as well as the nearby silver mines. These provided the Spanish Empire with much of its currency, which Tutino – developing Braudel's *longue durée* analysis of the emergence of capitalism – has already, in previous work, presented as the motor of an expanding proto-capitalist global trade network.<sup>[1]</sup> Mexico's heartland thus became 'an early crucible of entrepreneurship, native adaptation, and cultural innovation' (p. 67), whose agricultural products, and the surplus labour of its indigenous, Afro-descendant, European and mixed-race inhabitants, would go on to support five centuries of regional booms in mining, *pulque* production, sugar, industrial manufacturing, and construction. As a result, the communities of the heartland 'lived five centuries of intense interactions with

powerful promoters of capitalism – first commercial, then industrial, briefly national, now globalizing’ (p. 10).

The ways in which these communities experienced and contributed to the development of capitalism – and to the eventual downfall of each of the different forms outlined above (except, of course, the last) – defines the structure of this book, which is divided into three main sections covering ‘silver capitalism’ between 1500–1820; ‘industrial capitalism’ from 1820–1920; and then ‘national capitalism and globalization’ from 1920 to the present. In each section, Tutino details the myriad and often counter-intuitive ways in which economic and political shifts at local, national and global levels have intertwined throughout these periods.

In the first section he explores how the heartland communities developed politically, culturally and economically during three centuries of Spanish colonial rule, while tying into this account a broader story of the expansion and then retraction of the Spanish empire, and the rise and fall of Mexican silver production. Both of the latter, he argues, entered a terminal decline with the War of Independence, envisaged here as a popular attack on an economic order that had ceased to benefit those whose labour propped it up. Such local- and national-level changes had important global impacts, too: the decline of silver damaged Chinese and Indian manufacturing industries, with the slack taken up by the British (who were less dependent on silver as a currency), hastening the expansion of the British Empire and the industrialisation of the British Isles (pp.174–6).

Tutino then goes on to explore political, cultural and economic life in the heartland during the tumultuous ‘long nineteenth century’ that followed the transformation of ‘New Spain’ into the nation of ‘Mexico’. During this period, Mexico lost its northern territories to an expansionist US empire (whose economy, Tutino argues, flourished thanks to geography, slavery, and production for export, but needed ever more land to sustain itself). At the same time, Liberal and Conservative factions of the Mexican elite battled to impose their contrasting political and economic visions on what remained of the country. The Liberals successfully mobilised popular forces to defeat their conservative rivals and a French invasion, and then tried to radically reform Mexico’s economic and political structures in ways that alienated many of their erstwhile supporters, including the autonomous peasants of the heartland. The resultant conflicts helped Porfirio Díaz to win power in 1876, after which he established a coercive regime that, with an eye to ongoing US successes, promoted an export-led industrial and extractive economy, which engendered sustained economic growth, but also growing popular discontent.

In the third part of the book, Tutino analyses the contradictions of the ensuing Revolution in the heartland – which was the birthplace of Zapata’s radical agrarian revolutionary movement, but also an early laboratory for the corporatist economic and political programmes that would prop up subsequent, not-so-revolutionary regimes, and a burgeoning, ‘national’ form of capitalism. This analysis sets the stage for a rather grim final exploration of the way in which capricious regional elites and Chicago-boy influenced technocrats forced globalisation on the heartland from the 1960s onwards, destroying the old communal structures that revolutionary heroes like Zapata had died to defend.

The book’s vast chronological span, and its complex interweaving of political, cultural and economic history at local, regional, national and global levels, necessitates frequent changes in perspective. This could be confusing, but Tutino manages to make such shifts both comprehensible and revealing, alternating synthetic survey chapters offering ‘new visions of power and production, of those who ruled, and the conflicts that rattled their powers,’ with in-depth chapters that provide interrelated, but more intimate details of ‘family relations, community cultures, and popular insurgencies’ in the heartland (p. 21). It is not a surprise to learn that such wide-ranging analysis draws ‘builds on, revises and integrates’ more than five decades of Tutino’s research into Mexican history – both political and economic – since the 1960s (p. 419).

The book’s broad temporal and geographic scope is matched by Tutino’s engagement with various different theoretical literatures. Over the course of his analysis he draws on historical, sociological, anthropological and, of course, economic research, covering such diverse themes as communal autonomy, popular

mobilisation, the intersections between gendered, ethnic and class identities, the subtleties of exploitation, resistance, and the moral economy, and the local roots of global capitalism. It is with the latter literature that Tutino initially identifies most strongly, situating his work within a critical historical tradition founded by Marx, whose analysis of industrialisation in Britain he critiques for ignoring the global nature of the supply chains that made it possible (p. 3). Tutino cites as a more direct influence Braudel's work on the global, pre-industrial roots of capitalism (p. 5).<sup>[2]</sup>

However, Tutino also stresses that it is less Braudel's studies of European imperialists' search for profit through trade, and rather the oft-neglected 'other half' of Braudel's vision – which centres on the role of peasant communities in the development and sustenance of global capitalism – that has most influenced this book's focus on the autonomous communities of the heartland, and their role in national and global political and economic history. In line with Braudel, Tutino argues that capitalism, although often seen as an 'urban' phenomenon, is incapable of developing and expanding without the (often reluctant) support of those who survive on the land, and whose surplus labour and agricultural production feed the cities and industries upon which national and international trade networks depend. However, capitalism also hollows out the autonomous systems of production it depends on, as it gradually monetises local economies and seeks ever more permanent control over both their resources and labour. Like a parasite, then, capitalism is always doomed to eventually kill its hosts, leaving its own long-term survival in doubt.

In exploring the nature of the autonomous, community-based structures so central to his vision of the history of capitalism, Tutino asserts that these exist 'in three dimensions: ecological, political, and cultural' (thus he always writes in the plural, of 'autonomies' (p. 13)). Though closely intertwined, Tutino's three categories of communal autonomy are distinct in terms of their strengths and vulnerabilities: ecological autonomy flourishes wherever and whenever land is available to communities (as in the wake of depopulations caused by disease and war in the 16th and again in the early 19th centuries); but is easily damaged by the social and economic effects of population growth or new methods of production. Political autonomy – in the form of varying degrees of communal self-rule – can be defended through negotiation with outside forces, or popular mobilisation against them, but is vulnerable to the subversion of local elites (or of their popular rivals) by more powerful external agents. Meanwhile, Tutino draws on the work of James C. Scott to argue that cultural autonomy is always subject to both external and internal negotiations, but is also the most tenacious form of autonomy, as the powerful rarely manage to *force* understandings on subordinate peoples, who instead strive to understand the new worlds being constructed around them in their own distinct ways.

Tutino argues that the peasants of the Mexican heartland valued ecological autonomy above all else. Throughout five centuries, they struggled to preserve their control of the lands upon which they depended for their physical survival – to the extent that in the first half of the 20th century, they were willing to give up much of their old political autonomy, and even their ethno-cultural identities as 'Indians', in exchange for government support to this end. Despite such sacrifices, however, Tutino asserts that demographic shifts linked to global processes – such as the Green Revolution – have in more recent decades destroyed their ecological autonomy too. But he argues that the communities of the heartland – which have been tributaries to the Aztecs, *repúblicas de indios* under the Spaniards, tightly-squeezed indigenous villages during the Porfiriato, before becoming semi-collectivised peasant farms – or *ejidos* – in the wake of the Revolution – have managed to preserve much of their cultural autonomy into the present day, not in spite of, but *because* of, their ability to engage in such constant, radical reinvention.

Tutino also puts constant stress on the gendered aspects of all three 'autonomies'. Throughout most of the heartland's history, he argues, 'men ruled local politics and controlled most lands' (p. 15), enjoying these privileges as part of a social pact that required adult males to provide for their families, and women to take care of the needs of men, children, and the household. However, women retained the right to decide whether men's provision was sufficient for them to accept the rest of the patriarchal package. Tutino outlines various cases in which capitalist advances in the heartland – such as the industrialisation of *pulque* production or the mechanisation of cotton spinning – weakened men's ability to provide for their families, allowing (or forcing) women to embrace increased economic and political independence. Such gains were often

ephemeral, though, as male peasants acquiesced to any subsequent economic shifts that might swing the pendulum of patriarchy back in their favour, or, in more extreme cases, attempted to destroy the 'predatory' systems they held responsible for their loss of privilege.

At the same time, Tutino also recognises patriarchy as being tightly bound to hierarchies of class within the autonomous communities of the heartland. A minority of nobles, descended from those who ruled the region's communities before the arrival of the Spaniards, maintained their rule over the mass of commoners by guaranteeing the latter's right to rule their own households. Similarly, such inequalities of gender and class within communities were complemented by the unequal relationships that existed between the masses, their leaders, and powerful outside agents, such as priests, government officials, and the owners of nearby haciendas. Tutino emphasises the extent to which all of these relationships were subject to constant renegotiation from all sides, pointing out that 'Inequalities rule; yet exploitation is a blunt concept' (p. 17), and that while peasants would not grow rich through seasonal wage labour on big estates producing for national or global markets, they often earned enough to sustain themselves and their families in a satisfactory manner.

Such 'symbiotic exploitations' helped male peasants to fulfil their roles as patriarchal providers, thus reducing their opposition to economic systems defined by inequality; enabled communal leaders to fortify their positions by acting as mediators between their communities and outside forces; and, naturally, helped landowners and other businessmen to generate the wealth upon which economic growth and capitalist 'development' depended. The exact nature of such unequal class relationships, and the specific mechanisms by which large landowners, regional *caudillos* and local *principales* maintained their power, changed in line with prevailing, local- and national-level economic and political conditions. But Tutino argues that across the five centuries with which this book is concerned, 'hierarchies of patriarchy integrated and stabilized the unequal powers that organized heartland communities and their links to capitalism' (p. 16).

Ultimately, then, Tutino's book is an exploration of the many ways in which social, political, cultural and economic life in the heartland, and across much of the rest of Mexico, was conditioned by the intersections between the gender and class inequalities that divided the heartland's communities; the lopsided relationships that existed between these communities and outside forces (including regional elites, the national government and global markets); and the negotiations that all of the heartland's heterogeneous inhabitants – men and women, nobles and commoners, 'indios', mestizos, Africans and Spaniards – engaged in as they attempted to feed their families while preserving their diverse privileges and autonomies. When the balance between these factors was disturbed, whether by individual agency or structural change, the consequences could be explosive. Thus the upheaval and epidemics of the 16th century, during which 'dying shaped everything as life became commercial, patriarchy weakened, and new religious understandings set in,' birthed cultural innovations that restored unity to fractured indigenous communities, and gave rise to the cult of the Virgen de Guadalupe (pp. 87–8). Two centuries later, technological innovation and elite conflict in Spain prompted *pulque* producers and mining magnates north of the heartland to cut their workers' wages (pp. 174–6), which in turn pushed the latter to join political insurgents in 'violent pursuit of land and autonomies that broke silver capitalism and undermined Spain's rule in New Spain' (p. 56). And in 1910, the predatory, export-led capitalism that defined the Porfiriato, and had disrupted traditional peasant ways centred around maize-based subsistence farming, inspired Zapata and his thousands of peasant followers from across the heartland, to rebel against the regime in the name of 'land, autonomies – and patriarchy' (p. 261).

Tutino argues, however, that the same global forces that created the conditions for the Zapatista uprising also led to its final defeat. Throughout the Revolution, Zapata's less radical rivals held on to their control of Mexico's key exports, such as oil and henequen fibre. These they traded for hard currency and US weapons, which eventually allowed them to win the revolutionary civil war (pp. 307–16). The victors – primarily liberal nationalists drawn from the upper and middle classes – defined the course of post-revolutionary nation-building programmes, which therefore remained committed to capitalism. Under the careful watch of such revolutionary elites, the 'national capitalism' pioneered by President Cárdenas in Mexico's cities soon

turned 'global' (p. 390), while the countryside saw only limited, corporatist land reform, and then became ground zero for a 'Green Revolution' that Tutino sees as fomenting 'population explosion, erosion, and market dependence [that] forced rising numbers off the land in old communities' (p. 344–8).

Such pressures have transformed some of the heartland's communities into resorts for 'prosperous weekenders out from the city', reducing their inhabitants to the status of low-level service workers in other people's hotels (p. 365). Many others – particularly women – have left their homes altogether, seeking new lives in the nation's expanding cities. Meanwhile, most of those heartland peasants who managed to remain on the land could only do so as wage labourers for big agro-industrial companies (pp. 369–74). As a result of these ruptures, families and communities alike were fragmented, and many became ensnared in damaging cycles of violence. And although the heartland's former peasants made gains in terms of lower infant death rates and higher life expectancies and levels of education, government schools encouraged 'a postrevolutionary shift to Spanish as a first language and the loss of *indio* identities ... [which] was claimed as a success by merchant-bosses, and teachers too' (p. 369).

Tutino concludes his analysis by way of an epilogue whose title – 'After the Fall (Of Autonomies): Globalization Without Revolution' – effectively sums up his view that in the heartland, as in most other regions of 'an overpopulated urbanizing world, a return to autonomies on the land is improbable. That is a world we have lost' (p. 413). In the absence of autonomies upon which popular mobilisations for political and economic democratisation could be constructed, Tutino does not expect the predatory and increasingly unfair global economic order to change any time soon: over the past decade, he reminds us, 'no movements, nonviolent or violent, have begun to derail the concentrations of wealth and power detailed by Thomas Piketty' (p. 411). That said, he also notes that, having destroyed old autonomies, the future of capitalism itself has become uncertain. Change is inevitable. Whether it will be good or bad is impossible to tell. But the 'enduring resilience' of the heartland's inhabitants – who have struggled fiercely and successfully to sustain their communities, even if these are now poor barrios of Mexico City rather than rural villages – still 'gives reason for hope' (p. 415).

Overall, this epic study was a fascinating read, and one that has helped me to more fully appreciate the complex relationships between macro-economic forces and apparently local expressions of politics and culture. That said, in light of Tutino's detailed discussions of changing religious practices in the heartland during the Colonial era and into the mid-19th century, I felt that the book was missing a similarly detailed analysis of the religious dimension to the heartland's 20th-century experiences with revolution, land reform and global capitalism. Tutino does mention the privatisation – or even 'nationalisation' – of communal confraternity-owned lands since 1910, and details the way in which priests identifying with Liberation Theology encouraged the decline of communal religious fiestas in the later half of the 20th century (pp.370–1). But the 'globalisation' of local beliefs and practices – a process that is radically transforming the religious terrain in many other rural and/or indigenous regions of Latin America that form part of global systems – is not analysed in much depth here. This is all the more surprising given that evangelical congregations have grown so rapidly in the heartland since the 1970s, to the extent that in 2000, the state of Morelos came seventh out of 32 Mexican states in terms of the percentage of its population (10.4 per cent) that identified as Protestant.<sup>[3]</sup> That said, this book already takes in so much that adding any more such analysis might have made it unwieldy, or confused the development of Tutino's more central political and economic conclusions.

My other, inter-related quibble with the (already very wide-ranging) analysis presented in this book is that, while Tutino laments the erosion of ecological and political autonomies, in his presentation of recent ethno-cultural 'changes' in the heartland Tutino makes little mention of the idea of *loss*. Of course, Tutino's emphasis here – on change and transformation, rather than 'destruction' – helps him keep the agency of the heartland's inhabitants centre-stage, in the face of seemingly insurmountable structural challenges to their autonomies. However, I would argue that a significant quantity of real cultural 'stuff' went out of the window along with the wholesale transformation of heartland ethnic identities over the last half-century. While the overwhelming majority of the region's population is today formed of monolingual Spanish-

speaking *mestizos*, their parents or grandparents did not give up their older, indigenous identities of their own free will. The cultural, political and economic pressures that the post-revolutionary Mexican nation-state and the global capitalist system unleashed on the heartland forced its people to sacrifice their old command of both Spanish and Nahuatl or Otomí – each heir to distinct local traditions – for the nation’s one and *only* ‘national’ language. With the loss of their ancestral tongues and other defining aspects of indigenous identity – including, from the 1970s onwards, their very status as inhabitants of indigenous communities – the people of the heartland have not just lost their political and ecological autonomy, but also distinct forms of historical memory, ways of seeing and understanding the world, and intertwined (and often aesthetically beautiful) cultural and religious practices – which, I believe, constitute an important part of the same cultural autonomy that Tutino asserts they have maintained fairly intact.

With these very minor criticisms out of the way, then, I have only one, final observation, which serves as a sort of postscript to Tutino’s own epilogue, which was written prior to Mexico’s 2018 presidential elections. The result, as we now know, was a landslide victory for the leftist candidate, Andrés Manuel López Obrador (usually known as AMLO), who campaigned on a platform that challenged precisely the inequality, corruption and violence that Tutino sees as the product of the death of old autonomies at the hands of the neoliberal global order. While often reviled by a sensationalist media machine in Mexico and elsewhere as a populist demagogue – even a kind of ‘Mexican Trump’ – AMLO’s election campaign was predicated, above all, on hope: in particular, that his reformist agenda will bring about yet another transformation of Mexico, but this time one that benefits the peasants and workers upon whose shoulders the ‘Mexican miracle’ was built, to the detriment of their ecological, political, and to an extent, I would argue, their cultural autonomy, especially during recent decades of economic collapse, political ferment and violence.

It is no surprise, then, to find that AMLO’s promises of a ‘fairer’ kind of capitalism, and to devolve political power and collective dignity to Mexico’s poor, were lapped up in the ‘popular’ neighbourhoods of Mexico City built by those forced out of the heartland by the pressures of global capitalism. And, despite Tutino’s assertion that the revolutionary potential of Zapata’s homeland perished with the autonomies of its communities, it is notable that those who still live in the heartland itself also enthusiastically backed AMLO and his ‘Movement for National Regeneration’ (MORENA). In gubernatorial elections in Morelos, one of AMLO’s close allies triumphed with 50 per cent of the vote, while MORENA candidates took 43 per cent of the Estado de México’s municipal presidencies. Only time will tell as to whether AMLO will fulfil the hopes both of Tutino, and of the communities at the heart of this analysis, by helping to bring about a more ‘open, secure, and sustaining’ society (p. 414); or whether he will, conversely, prove to be yet another ‘institutional revolutionary’ unwilling to challenge the global concentration of wealth and power in the hands of a predatory elite. But ultimately this situation, in all its uncertainty, seems like a fitting footnote to Tutino’s own, final conclusions.

[1] cf. Tutino, *Making a New World: Founding Capitalism in the Bajío and Spanish North America*; and *From Insurrection to Revolution in Mexico: Social Bases of Agrarian Violence, 1750–1940* (Durham, NC, 2011)

[2] Fernand Braudel (trans. Sian Reynolds), *Civilization and Capitalism* (New York, NY, 1982–4), 3 vols.

[3] James Winslow Dow, ‘The expansion of Protestantism in Mexico: an anthropological view’, *Anthropological Quarterly*, 78, 4 (September 2005), 827–850 [DOI: 10.1353/anq.2005.0054].

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