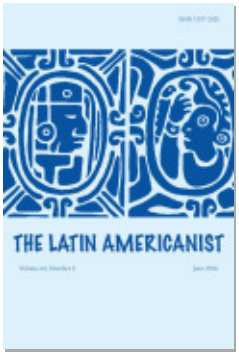
Working Women, Entrepreneurs, and the Mexican Revolution: The Coffee Culture of Córdoba, Veracruz by Heather Fowler-Salamini (review)

J. Justin Castro



The Latin Americanist, Volume 60, Number 2, June 2016, pp. 293-294 (Review)

Published by The University of North Carolina Press

Book Reviews

***Working Women, Entrepreneurs, and the Mexican Revolution: The Coffee Culture of Córdoba, Veracruz*. By Heather Fowler-Salamini. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2013, p. 440, $45.00.**

In this meticulously researched book, Heather Fowler-Salamini places women at the center of a history about labor in the state of Veracruz and the international coffee economy. Covering over fifty years, from the late Porfiriato to the 1950s, she examines entrepreneurs who established a successful coffee export industry in the city of Córdoba and the female sorters who collectivized into unions that wielded significant power. Fowler-Salamini shows that these women created a strong working culture headed by female *cacicas* within a "regional agro-export economy in the midst of revolution and modernization within the Atlantic economy" (15–16). In the process, she clearly demonstrates that women deserve more scholarly attention in the history of labor in Mexico, challenging male-dominated norms and narratives. This "history from below" is one of the finer works to come out on the history of Veracruz in recent years.

Fowler-Salamini builds this history from an impressive array of sources. She uses hundreds of documents obtained from more than twenty different archival and library collections. She also uses a large number of interviews that she conducted herself, interweaving these oral histories with archival materials in a seamless fashion, creating not only a well-argued, but also a well-crafted, manuscript. Fowler-Salamini exhibits similar skill in her photo selection and the creation of a number of simple but useful graphs about the Córdoba coffee industry and the people that made it happen.

Fowler-Salamini gives credit to the rise of the coffee industry in Córdoba to a group of ambitious Spanish immigrants. The region's "coffee planters were true entrepreneurs, technologically far more advanced in the cultivation and preparation of coffee than anywhere else in the republic" (25). The region was also geographically well-placed. It was close to Mexico's most important port city: Veracruz. Unlike some other enterprises, coffee exportation was not dramatically affected by the Revolution, though the conflict did bring hardship to some coffee merchants. Meanwhile, working women obtained a "new sense of self-worth and self-awareness" (84).

The Revolution galvanized solidarity among Córdoba's female coffee sorters. While Venustiano Carranza attempted to regain a favorable military and political position during the last half of the 1910s, women of all ages formed the Union of Coffee Sorters of Córdoba. In desperate need of support and a stable economy, Carranza's forces generally supported the union in order to keep exports stable and to minimize problems. "The gender of the striking workers was immaterial. In short, women unions

DOI: 10.1111/tla.12080

were vital elements of a restless labor movement that had to be kept under control" (134). Although these union women faced new difficulties as the often paternalistic revolutionary state solidified its control in the 1920s and 1930s, Fowler-Salamini argues that in the coffee workshops of central Veracruz, women were not fully marginalized within the growing and increasingly institutionalized labor movement; indeed, they maintained considerable strength.

One of the hallmarks of this study is that labor bosses, including Inés Reyes Ochoa and Sofía Castro González, became powerful and domineering figures in central Veracruz, showing a number of similarities to male *caciques*. "Women union leaders established a flexible and adaptable cacicazgo, which blended traditional and new elements of boss politics" (162). These women "served as effective intermediaries between the rank and file and the national labor movement, setting the state for the development of a women's collective cacicazgo" (161). They rewarded loyal followers, served patrons that best suited their desires, and, at times, became corrupt and greedy. Castro "ruled with an iron hand" (255). By the 1950s, as mechanization threatened more and more sorter jobs, union leaders, including Reyes and Castro, became more intertwined with national politics, serving as councilwomen for the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional*, or PRI. They also pushed for women's suffrage and galvanized groups of women for political action, sometimes in the form of uniformed marching bands. These traits show a number of similarities to their male counterparts, including "strong charismatic personalities" and "rotation of power within a collective leadership" (13). But women's unions, at least in this case, tended to rely less on violence and physical domination.

Working Women, Entrepreneurs, and the Mexican Revolution is a clear example of how regional studies are still unearthing insights on Revolution-era Mexico. This book will be of interest to students and scholars of Mexico, gender studies, labor and economic history, and the Mexican Revolution. It would work well as an undergraduate or graduate level reading in the classroom, and is essential to any serious study of the state of Veracruz or labor-state relations during the Revolution.

J. Justin Castro
Department of History
Arkansas State University

***Colombia and World War I: The Experience of a Neutral Latin American Nation during the Great War and Its Aftermath, 1914–1921*. By Jane M. Rausch. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014, p. 137, $75.00.**

Most Latin American history books rarely mention World War I. The majority of Latin American nations had no direct involvement in the war. After the United States entered the war in 1917, eight nations declared war on Germany and its allies, but only Brazil and Cuba contributed troops to the war effort. Five nations merely broke diplomatic relations with