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Power from Experience: Urban Popular Movements in Late  
Twentieth-Century Mexico (review)

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The Americas, Volume 63, Number 4, April 2007, pp. 700-701 (Review)

Published by Cambridge University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/tam.2007.0067>



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Giving a nod to democratic forms, the populist era was also marked by an acceptance and even appropriation of elements of black culture for nationalistic purposes, ensuring its popularity far beyond the borders of Latin America. However, periods marked by advances were succeeded by periods of repression, and the restrictions of the neo-liberal decade of the 1980s resulted in a new upsurge of racially defined black mobilization and a final recognition that past claims of the region's racial democracy were a myth. The book ends in 2000, but the author recognizes that the struggle has not ended and points to some of the ways Afro-Latin Americans will likely promote their political, economic, and cultural goals in the future.

These examples are only a taste of the extensive buffet that this fine book has to offer. The necessity to synthesize may result in the occasional glossing over of quite complex issues and assertions that do not always strike true. And the book's overall tone of optimism may strike some as unjustified. But Andrews provides the evidence to support his claims and conclusions, and in the end one is left with a clear appreciation of this particular sector of the population and a better understanding of Latin American history in general.

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#### URBAN SOCIAL HISTORY

*Power from Experience: Urban Popular Movements in Late Twentieth-Century Mexico.* By Paul Lawrence Haber. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006. Pp. xv, 280. Appendices. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$55.00 cloth.

This book provides a detailed examination of what the author defends as the "two most important lead urban popular movement organizations in Mexico" (p. 222), namely the Asamblea de Barrios (Assembly of Neighborhoods) of Mexico City and the Comité de Defensa Popular (Popular Defence Committee) of Durango. Whether these two movements were in fact so much more important than many other urban social movements of the period is open to debate. But here they are the subject of a serious and largely successful empirical inquiry into their organization, leadership and political trajectory. The inquiry gains considerable comparative leverage by distinguishing between the Comité, on the one hand, with its authoritarian style of leadership and willingness to do deals with government authorities, and the Asamblea, on the other, with a far more democratic organization that remained viscerally opposed to government policy. The author argues that the political style of the Comité eventually leads to decline and desertion by the urban poor. But all urban social movements in Mexico declined during the 1990s as non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and political parties increasingly took political center stage. So it is not easy to draw moral or political lessons from the comparative inquiry.

From the outset the author tends to wear his political heart on his sleeve. His research is originally driven by the sense that “some things in the world are terribly out of whack with my most cherished values” (p. viii), and he presents his reasons for the research in a language redolent of the Karl Marx of the 1844 Manuscripts. It is therefore a highly self-conscious choice to study urban social movements and, by extension, the fissiparous politics of the Mexican “Left;” and it is no surprise that the author relies rather heavily at times on the insights and opinions of some of Mexico’s best-known left-leaning political commentators and analysts (*políticos* in the vernacular). Happily, however, the author remains committed to the rigors of empirical research in delivering his detailed account of grassroots politics in Mexico. To his credit, he does not finally romanticize the social movements, still less the Mexican “Left,” but strives to reach balanced judgements about their political practices and their political impact.

The author also tends to make a meal out of methods and, in particular, goes a long way about to explain and defend the unique qualities of his “phenomenological” approach to the study of social movements—by which he aspires to capture the lived experience of their participants. By moments this elaborate discussion recalls the “sociology of action” of Alain Touraine. Fortunately this is simply a feint, and the study finally turns out to be nothing more than an ethnography of the social movements in question. But if it is nothing more than an ethnography, it is certainly nothing less, and so creates an argument that is carefully researched, well informed and nicely written. It is also tightly focussed. Despite the ten years or more of research went into its making, the book is pleasingly slim. In sum, this is a good book on social movements in Latin America. That makes it rare enough to be well worth reading.

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#### U.S./INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

*U.S. Intervention in British Guiana: A Cold War Story.* By Stephen G. Rabe. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005. Pp. 240. Illustrations. Map. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$45.00 cloth; \$19.95 paper.

In 1948, George Kennan advised the United States to abandon “unrealistic” objectives about human rights, raising the standard of living and democratization to prevent places like Guyana falling to communist subversion. Order based on security predominated within a framework in which the decline of imperialism and the construction of hegemony were parts of a single process. Rabe develops his argument cogently and parsimoniously, integrating literature on gender, ethnic studies, sociology, diplomatic history, and political science to produce a compassionate account of Guyana’s travails, from the period from 1953 to 1969, by which time Cheddi Jagan