

Cosío Villegas' *Historia moderna de México*

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THIS is an age of academic specialization—by disciplines and within them. Scholars in large measure devote their energies to monographic studies covering narrow subjects and limited periods of history to provide the required elements for more general synthesized and analytical recreations of the past. A work which combines both phases—monographic research and a broad sweep over a long period of a nation's history—requires not only scholarly talents and effort but organizational ability as well. Daniel Cosío Villegas' multivolume *Historia moderna de México* is such a work, and when the final volume is completed, it will be a landmark in Latin American historiography.¹

The logical procedure for such an evaluation is to understand the goal which Cosío Villegas set for himself and his associates and then to judge the extent to which they have realized it. The group's plan of work, definition of terms, and method of operation are set forth in the *Llamada general* which serves as an introduction to the initial volume of the series. Here the author explains decisions relative to time limits, periodization, material to be covered, and the structure and dimensions of his work. In his own words, he determined:²

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¹ Daniel Cosío Villegas (ed.), *Historia moderna de México* (7 vols., México, 1955-65). Vol. I. Daniel Cosío Villegas, *La República restaurada. La vida política* (México, 1955); Vol. II. Francisco R. Calderón, *La República restaurada. La vida económica* (México, 1955); Vol. III. Luis González y González, Emma Cosío Villegas, and Guadalupe Monroy, *La República restaurada. La vida social* (México, 1957); Vol. IV. Moisés González Navarro, *El Porfiriato. La vida social* (México, 1957); Vol. V. Daniel Cosío Villegas, *El Porfiriato. La vida política exterior, Part One* (México, 1960); Vol. VI. Daniel Cosío Villegas, *El Porfiriato. La vida política exterior, Part Two* (México, 1963); Vol. VII. Luis Nicolau d'Oliver, Francisco R. Calderón, Guadalupe Nava Oteo, Fernando Rosenzweig, Luis Cosío Silva, Gloria Peralta Zamora, and Emilio Coello Salazar, *El Porfiriato. La vida económica, Parts One and Two* (México, 1965).

² Daniel Cosío Villegas, "Llamada general," *Historia Mexicana*, IV (January-March 1955), 328.

. . . first, that the best temporal limits of the modern history of Mexico are the years 1867 and 1911; second, that two different, but related periods are distinguished within it; third, that social and economic changes corresponded to the turbulent political life of the Restored Republic [1867-1876] and to the undisturbed calm of the Porfirian regime. These changes were moderate in the first instance, major and important in the second, and, as a consequence, the political account should accompany the social and economic ones.

Out of these basic decisions grew a general plan for "una gran *Historia moderna de México*" to be published in "six thick volumes" with companion volumes devoted to the political, economic, and social life for each of the two periods under study. The ambitious nature of the undertaking in both the extent of the period under study and the variety of topics to be covered was apparent to all concerned. Further, Cosío Villegas' insistence on exhaustive use of primary sources magnified the dimensions of the tasks. "A work of that magnitude and these aims could not be attempted by one man unless he began it when he was thirty and dedicated the next thirty years entirely to it."³ Instead he created the Seminario de Historia Moderna de México at El Colegio de México and worked out a system of collaborative effort in the various stages of historical research and writing.

Now, seventeen years later, the end of the effort is in sight. Daniel Cosío Villegas and his colleagues have taken longer than they had anticipated. At the time of the publication of the first volume after seven years of labor, don Daniel thought that the work would be completed in two or three more years! He and his cohorts have also delivered much more than they promised. The originally projected six volumes already total eight, including two unplanned volumes devoted to foreign relations and an extra one on the economic life of the Porfiriato. There remains to be published a concluding volume on the political history of the Porfirian era.

As the project developed, its director has had to contend with many problems: turnover in personnel in the Seminar, the rising salaries and cost of publication, and unforeseen calamities such as the collapse during the rainy season of the roof of the room assigned to the group in the Secretaría de Hacienda. Fortunately Cosío and his investigators escaped without injury. With some effort they also managed to keep their accumulated historical treasures out of the reach of rats. Cosío once remarked that he had been seriously tempted to dedicate the *Historia* to those companions of the labor of investigation: "For having obliged us to speed it up, and for having let us do

³ *Ibid.*, 329.

it, we dedicate this work to the beautiful white rats of the Secretaría de Hacienda."⁴

The publication of these volumes has been recognized as an achievement of unusual historiographical importance. From a survey of almost four score of the reviews and articles in which scholars of two nations have commented on the *Historia moderna de México* it is possible to illustrate and summarize the praise and criticism which the work has elicited. Without exception the reviewers have been impressed by the dimensions—both physical and intellectual—of the effort and of the achievement. They have praised Cosío and his fellow investigators for their wide variety of sources, for their organization of material, and for their style. They have called attention to the new fields which the *Historia moderna* has opened for investigation and to its interpretive syntheses. Words such as *clear, great, balanced, singular, and judicious* recur frequently in the reviews.

A few quotations will illustrate this praise. Antonio Gómez Robledo called the first volume "a work of impressive erudition and objectivity, in which the primary and secondary sources, insofar as is humanly possible, have been exhausted."⁵ Frank A. Knapp observed that, "Books of unusual qualities do not appear frequently. . . . The first volume of the *Historia moderna de México* [is] . . . a singular classic on the epoch with which it deals. . . ."⁶

This praise was echoed in reviews of subsequent volumes in the series. The sociologist José Iturriaga stated that the second and third volumes "possess the same wealth of information, the same rigor in the technique of investigation, the same scientific seriousness and above all, the same order as that of the initial volume. . . ."⁷ Historian Daniel Moreno, reviewing the fourth volume of the series and the first dealing with the Porfiriato, praised the research in this study of the social history of the period: "The handling of sources and the bibliography is frankly terrifying. . . ."⁸ Salvador Reyes Nevares called this volume a "book of enormous interest, scrupulously thought out and written,"⁹ and Agustín Cué Canovas welcomed "with gratitude

⁴ María Luisa Adame C., "Curiosidades y tragedias alrededor de la Historia de Cosío [sic] Villegas," *Novedades*, May 12, 1955.

⁵ Antonio Gómez Robledo, "La *Historia moderna de México* de Daniel Cosío Villegas," *Novedades*, August 21, 1955.

⁶ Frank A. Knapp, "Rescate de diez años perdidos," *Historia Mexicana*, V (October-December 1955), 244, 252; "Nueva historia de México," *Excelsior*, April 23, 1955.

⁷ José Iturriaga, "La magna obra de Cosío Villegas," *Novedades*, November 2, 1956.

⁸ Daniel Moreno, "La sociedad porfirista," *Excelsior*, August 6, 1957.

⁹ Salvador Reyes Nevares, "Los libros de julio," *Novedades*, August 31, 1957.

and enthusiasm this book which sets forth the bitter reality of a now departed epoch."¹⁰

The fifth and sixth volumes to appear, published as the first and second parts of the planned fifth volume, are concerned with the diplomatic history of the modern era. José Bravo Ugarte wrote that in the first part "the author capably makes use of an enormous quantity of material, which he handles with agility, grace, and competence and which he uses to treat the different aspects of his theme fully and with profundity."¹¹ Carlos Bosch García added that "the result is a reference book that fills a fundamental gap in our knowledge, and which, because of the form and technique with which it is written, will be a source of aid for future investigations. . . . Every reader will find it a difficult, hard, methodic, intelligent, serious, and definitive book."¹² Another critic praised the succeeding volume because of its "good sense, balance, and critical judgment."¹³ Most recently the two-volume study of the economic life of the Porfirian period was hailed as "the best perspective of the economic events of the Porfirian regime. . . ."¹⁴

Despite this lavish praise, the *Historia moderna* has not completely escaped the barbed darts of the critics. Shortly after the first volume appeared in 1955 a distinguished group of Mexican historians gathered to discuss its merits. They recognized that it was clearly the beginning of a major scholarly effort. But Arturo Arnáiz y Freg complained that the bulky volume was too heavy to read in bed. His comment prompted Cosío's rejoinder that his book was not intended for bedtime reading. Writing about the second volume, Walter V. Scholes of the University of Missouri agreed with Arnáiz y Freg: "The reader must be able to hold four pounds of book in his hand and make constant reference to the footnotes at the end of the book. The footnotes are not specific; rather, they give the reader an indication of the sources used for one to three paragraphs or for one to many pages. . . ."¹⁵ In later volumes the references became more specific, but a reviewer of the two devoted to the economic life of the Díaz period complained

¹⁰ Agustín Cué Canovas, "Porfirismo y sociedad," *Diario del Sureste*, June 23, 1957.

¹¹ José Bravo Ugarte, "Nueva entrega de la *Historia moderna de México*," *Historia Mexicana*, X (July-September 1960), 161.

¹² Carlos Bosch García, "Diplomacia porfiriana," *Historia Mexicana*, X (January-May 1961), 500-501.

¹³ Martín Quirarte, "Séptimo tomo de la *Historia moderna de México*," *Excelsior*, March 28, 1965.

¹⁴ José Bravo Ugarte, *Historia Mexicana*, XIV (January-March 1965), 489.

¹⁵ *HAHR*, XXXVI (August 1956), 401.

about the placement of the notes at the end of the second volume rather than at the bottom of the appropriate page.¹⁶ Criticism has also been leveled against one part or another of this work for its extreme detail, for the obscurity of chapter titles and subtitles, and because the bibliography was limited to works actually cited rather than being a more complete listing of all titles consulted.

Not all critical comment has been focused on questions of physical dimensions, format, or style. Salazar Viniegra differed with Cosío's interpretation of the personality of Díaz and with what he considered to be the arbitrary demarcation of the historical periods of the República Restaurada and the Porfiriato.¹⁷ Luis Chávez Orozco denied the appropriateness of the term "restored" Republic.¹⁸ The distinguished Catholic historian Bravo Ugarte complained that the Conservatives had been presented in an unfair light, while Gómez Robledo expressed the view that Cosío Villegas had been too severe in some of his judgments of Mexico's Central American policy.¹⁹

Several reviewers noted the heavy emphasis on material relating to Mexico City, especially in the volumes treating with social history. "In many instances the same thing happens as in the three volumes already published; one has the impression of reading a history of Mexico City, and not of the Republic."²⁰ Cosío Villegas was aware of this problem of coverage and attributed it largely to the availability of material. In his prologue to the third volume the project director identified this difficulty as one of the principal problems encountered by his social historians. Certainly future Mexican historians will find much to be done in state and regional history.

Some of the sharpest criticisms have been directed at the collaborative method employed in the various stages of preparation of the *Historia moderna*. Salazar Viniegra remarked sarcastically that "the spirited team of writers of history formed by Cosío Villegas and his immature followers, in order to be complete, lacked only one detail—a historian."²¹ And Chávez Orozco, perhaps the most vocal critic of the initial volume, urged that the author read the sources himself

¹⁶ José Bravo Ugarte, *Historia Mexicana*, XIV (January-March 1965), 489.

¹⁷ Guillermo Salazar Viniegra, "Porfirio Díaz y gente menuda," *Excelsior*, August 23, 1955.

¹⁸ Luis Chávez Orozco, "Cosío Villegas historiador," *Excelsior*, April 22 and May 4, 1955.

¹⁹ Antonio Gómez Robledo, "Una historia diplomática mexicana," *Foro Internacional*, I (January-March 1961), 471-472.

²⁰ *Historia Mexicana*, VII (January-March 1958), 432. See also, W. H. Calcott, *HAHR*, XXXVI (February 1957), 105.

²¹ Guillermo Salazar Viniegra, "Porfirio Díaz."

rather than depend on investigators whom he categorized as Cosío's "anonymous collaborators."²² Cosío replied that the first volume carried only his name since he alone was responsible for everything in it: "The plan, each and every piece of material read, the selection of materials, the verification of sources, the editing, everything, absolutely everything, was my own personal work."²³ He added, however, that collective effort would characterize much of the series. The seminar method, variously labeled by others "workshop," "laboratory of investigators," and "team," Cosío himself explained and defended in the *Llamada General*. It was dictated, he said, by the sheer size of the project.²⁴

Two types of aspirants entered the seminar: the older, more experienced investigator usually with formal academic preparation, and the younger, less qualified assistant or reader. The investigators were assigned to prepare a major section of a volume, while the assistants were given more specific instructions to digest material and take notes. All read voraciously, recording pieces of information and excerpts from important documents on uniform cards together with necessary bibliographic information. Using this material, all members of the seminar might write up a draft of a particular topic. If an assistant did well, promotion to the rank of investigator followed. If he did poorly, he remained an assistant. In every instance, the drafts were prepared in close consultation with the chief investigator of the particular group and occasionally with the director of the seminar, Cosío Villegas himself.

When the draft manuscript was ready, the director examined it with the writer and the chief investigator responsible for that volume or section. The corrected draft would be copied to permit critical discussion by all the members of the seminar. No contributor to this project escaped a critical reading of his contribution. These animated but friendly sessions enabled each writer to measure the effect of his work on a group of readers. The discussions might encourage him to eliminate minor contradictions, identify areas for further research, clarify obscure statements, strengthen the organization of his material, and enrich the language of its presentation. Invariably, too, these sessions helped to delimit one section from another and yet to establish the necessary connections between them.

This method is reminiscent of the "literary workshop" employed

²² Luis Chávez Orozco, "Cosío Villegas historiador."

²³ Daniel Cosío Villegas, "El crítico y declamación histórica," *Excelsior*, April 27, 1955.

²⁴ Cosío Villegas, "Llamada general," 329-332. See also, *Historia moderna de México. La República restaurada. La vida política*, 11-30.

in the nineteenth century by Hubert Howe Bancroft, another historian whose multivolume publications also included an extended history of Mexico. Under close examination, however, the apparent similarity proves at best to be superficial, for in Bancroft's day there was little possibility of obtaining the services of a trained investigator, much less a scholar with a Ph.D. in history, and he had to rely on native intelligence and common sense. Apart from the absence of the trained scholars who provided the core of Cosío's "team," there were other notable differences. Bancroft's workshop was larger and the turnover of personnel much more considerable. Furthermore, the names of the collaborators, even those with sustained roles of major importance, remained anonymous as far as the general public was concerned. Most serious of all, Bancroft's system of coordination and supervision broke down, and his direction was superficial or even nonexistent. Lastly, Bancroft felt obligated because of commercial considerations to organize his work in such a way as to play up the history of specific geographic areas, include unwarranted references to individuals, and even to modify interpretations. Cosío's institutional support freed him from this kind of constraint.

The director of the *Historia moderna* project recognized that individual authorship would have provided greater coherence and identified responsibility. Unfortunately no individual could have carried out a scholarly investigation of this magnitude alone without devoting a lifetime to it. Cosío pointed to other advantages of the collaborative method through rational division of labor. He emphasized the training aspect, noting that "the seminar has the unquestionable merit of being the seedbed of new investigators."²⁵ This prospect of developing bright young students while carrying out a major historiographical project helped to attract foundation funds for the support of the project.

An arduous undertaking extending over more than a decade and a half was bound to experience some turnover in personnel. Some fell by the wayside because of the demanding nature of the task, while others left the seminar group because career decisions led them to other endeavors. These decisions were more common among the readers than among the investigators, for Cosío pledged that investigators who actually wrote sections would be clearly recognized as co-authors.

No less than a dozen contributors have achieved this recognition.²⁶ Cosío realized that multiple authorship represented a danger to the unity of the work. The danger was lessened, however, by the fact that

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 332.

²⁶ See the list of authors for the individual volumes in footnote 1.

while the group represented a range of viewpoints, the variety, though wide, was not extreme. Also the collective influence of seminar discussion and the coordinating supervision of the director provided further safeguards. Cosío justified his reputation as a leading exponent of the objective school of history writing in Mexico by the guiding principle he set for his youthful collaborators: ". . . that of sharply and unequivocally characterizing the judgment—even the appreciation—of what a statement of facts is, and never making any statement, large or small, without the aid of a document whose authenticity had been reasonably demonstrated. . . ." ²⁷ Similarly, he made no effort to influence the writing style of the contributors other than to encourage clear and correct expression.

In the organization of the Seminario de Historia Moderna de México and the guidance of its scholarly endeavors the role of Daniel Cosío Villegas looms large. He has provided inspiration, organizational ability, leadership and direction, and the identification of his scholarly prestige with the group's efforts. He has sought, justified, and obtained the required financial support. As director of the seminar he has been able not only to provide the investigators with the benefits of his knowledge, experience, and skill, but also to coordinate and integrate the efforts of the individual authors. His *Llamada general* and *Llamadas particulares* are a series of brilliant essays serving to introduce the entire history as well as each individual volume. These introductions set the tone of the series, summarizing the conclusions of the particular volume and pointing out interrelations with other volumes. He has also written three key volumes of the *Historia moderna* by himself—that treating of the political history of the República Restaurada and the two volumes devoted to the foreign relations of Mexico during the more than four decades between the Intervention and the Revolution.²⁸

²⁷ Cosío Villegas, "Llamada general," 333-334.

²⁸ In addition, and as a by-product of this investigation, don Daniel has made a sizeable contribution to the scholarly publications on the modern history of Mexico. His writings include two notable monographs, *La Constitución de 1857 y sus críticos* (México, 1957) and *Los Estados Unidos contra Porfirio Díaz* (México, 1956), and an exceedingly useful bibliographical study, *La Historiografía política del México moderno* (México, 1963). An English translation of the second by Dr. Nettie Lee Benson, *The United States versus Porfirio Díaz*, was published by the University of Nebraska Press in 1963. Other scholarly by-products of the labors of the Seminar of Modern Mexican History include Moisés González Navarro's splendid monograph entitled *La colonización en México* (México, 1960) and three volumes of statistical data for the Porfiriato: Moisés González Navarro, *Estadísticas sociales del porfiriato, 1877-1911* (México, 1956); Seminario de Historia Moderna de México, *Estadísticas económicas del porfiriato: Comercio exterior de México, 1877-1911* (México, 1960); Seminario de Historia moderna de México, *Estadísticas económicas del porfiriato: Fuerza de trabajo actividad económica por sectores, 1877-1911* (México, 1964).

Time undoubtedly will provide the best test of the true magnitude of the contribution of Cosío Villegas and his colleagues of the Seminario de Historia Moderna de México. A preliminary assessment, however, is now possible. The preparation of these volumes has already initiated a number of young investigators into the historical profession by enabling them to carry out a major historical project at an early stage in their development. In addition, the series represents a major achievement for objective historical writing in Mexico and underscores the qualities that differentiate the historian from the polemicist. It also should serve as a counterbalance to those who insist on a mechanistic and Marxist interpretation of Mexican history or to those who have sought to apply the existentialist approach to the study of the nation's past.²⁹ Lastly Cosío and his colleagues have taken a major step toward filling the gap of understanding of more than four decades of Mexican history as well as of the nature of the roots of subsequent events.

Certainly the volumes of the *Historia moderna* will be regarded as standard references for many years to come. Despite their comprehensive nature the treatment of all topics is not always exhaustive or definitive. Much remains to be done, and by their very comprehensiveness the volumes often suggest the direction for subsequent investigations. There can be no doubt that in the future scholars undertaking research in this period will use as their point of departure the seminar's bibliographical studies and the thousands of filing cards preserved in the library of El Colegio de México which provide the foundation of the *Historia moderna*.

From the outset it was clear that this work represented in breadth and scholarly achievement one of the most significant historical undertakings in the Latin American field.³⁰ Indeed, evaluation of the critical reception accorded the volumes tends to support a leading commentator's affirmation that "it will rank with the best produced in any country."³¹ In any event, it is understandable that Daniel Cosío Villegas should be regarded at home and abroad as the "gran señor de la historia mexicana."³²

²⁹ Robert A. Potash, "Historiography of Mexico since 1821," *HAHR*, XL (August 1960), 420-422; Robert A. Naylor, "Research Opportunities in Modern Latin America: I. Mexico and Central America," *The Americas*, XVIII (April 1962), 352-365; Merrill Rippy, "Theory of History: Twelve Mexicans," *The Americas*, XVII (January 1961), 223-240.

³⁰ See review by S. R. Ross in *Inter-American Review of Bibliography*, XIV (October-December 1964), 430-431.

³¹ Potash, "Historiography of Mexico," 421.

³² Gómez Robledo, "La Historia moderna."