Introduction

Only a decade after the onset of Mexico's 1910 revolution, the people of Monterrey, Nuevo León could celebrate the class harmony that reigned in their preeminently industrial city. The *regiomontanos* attributed this aura of industrial peace to the unique character of their city's workers and the inherent benevolence of their employers. They took special pride in both. Monterrey’s workers carried a reputation for their hard work, industriousness, and staunch independence. They manifested the latter through their renowned autonomy from the national unions organized in the revolution’s wake. The industrialists earned local acclaim for having built their companies with Mexican capital. Moreover, such pillars of local industry as the Cuauhtémoc Brewery and the Fundidora steel mill provided their employees with welfare benefits unique by Mexican standards. Since the early 1920s, civic boosters insisted, company paternalism had established the cornerstone of labor peace and economic prosperity. Then, just as General Lázaro Cárdenas assumed the presidency in 1935, class struggle seemingly engulfed their hometown. In a startling development, the steel workers broke from the Independent Unions of Nuevo León and affiliated with the national Miner-Metalworkers Union. Ten days later, workers at the brewery’s subsidiary glass plant, Vidriera Monterrey, struck in support of militant unionism.

The industrialists blamed this outbreak of militance on the Cárdenas government’s intrusive labor policies. Indignant at this perceived threat to their social hegemony, the industrialists orchestrated a mass antigovernment rally. They punctuated their resistance with a two-day lockout, shutting down their factories in a display of economic might.1 Falling as it did on Mexico’s Constitution Day, the march’s organizers portrayed the event as a patriotic response to the “highly dangerous intrusion of communist agitators.” That the agitators had arrived from Mexico City only sharpened local indignation. On the days preceding the protest, radio broadcasts and

1 The following paragraph is based upon *El Porvenir*, Monterrey, January 10–February 7, 1932; *Excélsior*, Mexico City, February 2–6, 1936.
flyers posted about town reminded the *regiomontanos* that the “Communist Government of Mexico” threatened their jobs and their families’ well-being. The message resonated powerfully. On the morning of February 5, 1936, approximately 50,000 protestors marched in the largest antigovernment demonstration to that point in Mexico’s history. With thousands of loyal workers at their side, the city’s captains of industry led a cross-class, multi-generational procession that caught the nation’s attention. The movement proved a stunning success for Mexico’s most powerful group of industrialists, a vivid display of their workers’ inherent loyalty toward their employers.

Two days later, President Cárdenas arrived in Monterrey. Over the course of the following week, he met with local businesspeople and rival union leaders, listening attentively to their respective positions. Then, on February 11, he addressed thousands of supporters from the balcony of Nuevo León’s Palacio del Gobierno. Outlining his government’s labor policy, Cárdenas reiterated his promise to unify all Mexican workers into a national labor federation. Monterrey’s company-controlled unions – the so-called independents – impeded that unity. He blamed the labor unrest upon the industrialists and their refusal to recognize the workers’ right to elect their union leaders. Then, as if to confirm the *regiomontanos*’ fears of communism, the president resolved that employers who resisted unionization “hand their industries over to their workers or the government.” “That would be patriotic,” he concluded, “the industrial lockout is not.”

Cárdenas’s veiled expropriation threat never materialized. But his government’s labor policies tested the limits of Monterrey’s unique system of industrial paternalism, offering workers two clear alternatives: “stay on the company’s side” or “go with the reds,” as locals referred to militant unions. Some workers forsook unionism for the security of paternalism; others embraced it for its promises of industrial democracy. The outcome separated the *regiomontano* workers and their families into two opposed camps, a division that endured for decades to come. This is the story of those workers and their experience of paternalism and revolution.

*Deference and Defiance* examines how the workers and industrialists of Monterrey perceived, responded to, and helped shape the course of Mexico’s revolution. It builds upon and complements the “postrevisionist” scholarship on the period. Whereas an earlier generation of historians downplayed the grassroots nature of the revolution by positing the state as the era’s dominant protagonist, scholars have since revised our understanding of the revolutionary process. By examining the revolution from a peripheral and largely rural perspective, the postrevisionists show that policy making and implementation entailed a “negotiation of rule” among state agents, local elites, and popular classes. The revolutionary government’s economic, social, and

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2 Jose P. Saldaña, *Crónicas históricas* (Monterrey, 1982), 250.
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Cultural projects encountered resistance at the local level. Regional developments in turn forced the ruling party to revise its policies of state formation to forge the most durable political consensus in twentieth-century Latin America. This study examines that process from an urban and industrial perspective. Mexico remained a predominantly agrarian society into the 1940s. Yet within a single generation, rapid industrialization shifted the nation’s demographic profile and economic base. Subsequent generations of workers and employers inherited the legal institutions, corporate policies, and union practices bequeathed by the labor struggles of the era. Deference and Defiance sheds new light on Mexican working-class and labor history. For decades, the literature remained overshadowed by political narratives that highlighted organized labor’s integration into Mexico’s ruling party. Meanwhile, social histories of working-class Mexicans focus on the prerevolutionary era and/or the foreign-owned export enclaves. This study of urban workers provides a regional perspective to organized labor, its leaders, and its relation to the state. It revises our conception of those institutions and activists by assessing the interrelated struggles surrounding local politics and Mexican labor law, a crucial yet understudied outcome of the revolution. It enlivens the history of labor by exploring the culture of the local union hall and the workers who inhabited it. We also travel from the political arenas and union assemblies to the worlds of work and leisure, exploring the camaraderie and antagonisms that developed on the factory floors and in the blue-collar neighborhoods of Monterrey.

From there, Deference and Defiance departs from traditional studies of Mexican labor and the revolution by highlighting new issues and extending our coverage beyond the Cárdenas presidency and through that key transitional decade of the 1940s. We explore the experiences and perspectives of Monterrey’s nonunion workers, the men and women who never struck nor attended a union assembly. These were laborers for whom consensual

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4 A cross-generational survey would include Rosendo Salazar, Los pueblos de la gloria, 1907–1922 (Mexico City, 1953); Marjorie Ruth Clark, Organized Labor in Mexico (Chapel Hill, 1934); Joe Ashby, Organized Labor and the Mexican Revolution under Lazaro Cárdenas (Chapel Hill, 1967); Arturo Anguiano, El estado y la política obrera del cardenismo (Mexico City, 1973); Kevin Middlebrook, The Paradox of Revolution: Labor, the State, and Authority in Mexico (Baltimore, 1995).

industrial relations remained the predominant feature of their working lives. As contemporary *regiomontanos* proudly proclaimed, labor relations in Monterrey were harmonious relative to other regions of Mexico. Those contemporaries rightly acknowledged that “class harmony” was the product of company paternalism. We examine paternalism as an institutionalized system of industrial relations that “intended to extend non-wage benefits... and create an identifiable corporate culture” among factory operatives. Monterrey’s industrialists offered their employees a range of welfare benefits like company housing, schools, and leisure activities. They did so in order to check labor unrest, instill work discipline, and foster company loyalty. We examine how paternalism assumed different forms at the companies under study and ask why workers responded in divergent ways to their employers’ benevolent pretensions.

A comparative study of shop-floor relations illuminates the limits to paternalism. It explains why some working people opted to support militant unions and untangles a seeming paradox: why a city with a conservative reputation became a stronghold of communist labor activism in the 1930s and 1940s. The issue of unionism also sheds light on the contrasting ways in which Monterrey’s employers acquiesced to or resisted the state’s shifting labor policies. Due to their adversarial relation to the central government, the captains of industry appear prominently in the literature on revolutionary Mexico. But as the author of a seminal study of the industrialists notes, historians have limited their treatment of Monterrey to the elite’s critical interventions in national politics. We explore their antagonisms with the state as well as their everyday interactions with popular classes. In particular, we examine how both state labor policy and working-class pressures forced the industrialists to repeatedly revise their managerial strategies. In the process, the Monterrey elite themselves developed a class consciousness and created new and enduring forms of corporate solidarity. Meanwhile, they

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6 Paternalism was a pervasive factor in the lives of Mexico’s popular classes. It infused social relations in the countryside and remained embedded in the political culture of Porfirián and postrevolutionary Mexico. As employed in this study, the terms *company paternalism*, *industrial paternalism*, and *welfare capitalism* refer synonymously and specifically to managerial practices. Manifestations of patriarchy, benevolence, and personalism characterized the paternalistic practices of Monterrey’s employers, just as they did the life of the hacienda and relations between the Mexican state and popular classes. But these characteristics, as Flamming notes, “were not so much the essence of paternalism as they were patterns of behavior that operated within and further complicated the system.” Douglas Flamming, *Creating the Modern South: Millhands and Managers in Dalton, Georgia, 1884–1984* (Chapel Hill, 1992), 360–61.

attempted to mobilize their employees' opposition to unions by fashioning working-class identities in tune with their own political outlooks.

Our study of working-class identity formation defers to Emilia Viotti da Costa's call to analyze not only the construction of multiple, overlapping, and competing identities but also how and why "one comes to prevail over the others." Monterrey's workers perceived their world through a multiplicity of lenses. *Deference and Defiance* explores how material life and discourses of power and resistance shaped and reflected distinct political identities—be they regional, occupational, gendered, or class. Theoretically indebted to the writings of Antonio Gramsci, scholars like Stuart Hall recognize identity as "a matter of 'becoming' as well as 'being.'" Identities are products of history and, as such, undergo constant transformation. Gramsci's own writings challenged the Marxist orthodoxy of his day: that class identities retain a level of uniform, objective purity. His own experiences during the rise of fascism in 1920s Italy informed Gramsci's understanding that working-class political identities may be divided, intersected, and subdued by a host of extraeconomic discourses. He thus invoked the notion of "contradictory consciousness" in recognition of the ambivalent and intertwined character of working-class identities. Gramsci perceived that such identities resulted from structural, ideological, and historical forces. Perhaps most importantly, he recognized that identity formation was a product of human agency and interventions.

We analyze the mutual construction of subjective identities at and away from the workplace to explain workers' divergent perceptions of their employers, unions, and the state. For example, the practices of company paternalism both constructed and reinforced regional identities as part of an explicit managerial effort to undermine feelings of class or allegiances to organized labor. Meanwhile, a radical labor culture beyond the paternalistic grasp of the industrialists contested the workers' loyalty by drawing upon languages of class and revolution. Indeed, throughout this period of study both militant and more conservative worker-activists attempted to

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mobilize rank-and-file laborers through discursive appeals to their regional, patriotic, and gendered identities. The activists’ capacity to transmit their political ideas and cultural values to fellow workers depended on their ability to earn the rank and file’s trust and respect. We therefore invest considerable attention in the patterns of sociability and human relationships forged between rank-and-file workers and labor activists on and away from the factory floor. *Deference and Defiance* thus helps conceptualize the role these intermediaries performed in the (re)ordering of the political and cultural universes of the Mexican working class.

These issues are examined through a comparative study of four companies. Aside from the railway yards, Monterrey’s first large-scale employer was the American Smelting and Refining Company (ASARCO). The smelter’s foreign ownership made it unique because in contrast to national trends, Mexicans largely financed the city’s industrialization. That distinction lent those industrialists a unique place in local society and national politics. In the 1890s, Monterrey’s Garza Sada family launched their industrial empire with the Cuauhtémoc Brewery. A decade later, they opened the first of many subsidiary companies, Vidriera Monterrey. The glass company first manufactured bottles for the brewery. By the 1920s, the firm’s workers were also producing crystal ware and plate glass for an expanding domestic market. Today those beer and glass companies anchor two of Latin America’s largest multinational conglomerates, FEMSA and Vitro. But the company for which Monterrey first earned national renown was the Fundidora Iron and Steel Works, the first and only integrated mill in Latin America until the 1940s. Founded in 1900 by a consortium of local and national industrialists, the Fundidora would establish its headquarters in Mexico City to be near its principal client, the federal government. These four companies shared common traits, notably their scale of operations and their paternalistic labor regimes. But key distinctions in their ownership and managerial styles, their work regimes, and their peculiar relations to the state make them outstanding cases for comparative analysis.

Like many histories of urban labor in Latin America, the focus here is upon factory and (occasionally) railway workers. It regrettably but necessarily ignores the domestics, retail clerks, building tradesmen, and workshop hands whose voices remain muted in the archives that made this study possible. Several of those collections will prove invaluable to future historians. Given their concerns in Mexico, the United States consular staff left a repository of reports on local economies, politics, and labor disputes. State Department officials also enjoyed privileged access to the thoughts and organizational activities of the local elites whose company they often kept. In Mexico City, a visit to the National Archives should begin with its Labor Department holdings. Established early in the revolution, the agency gathered records on industrial accidents, costs of living, and labor
market conditions. Its federal labor inspectors also traveled to the provinces to mediate disputes. Their reports offer keen insights into state labor policy and the bureaucrats charged with implementing it. The voices of managers, workers, and local government officials are logged in the extensive case files produced by Nuevo León’s labor arbitration boards. Housed in the state archive, these well-catalogued labor court records emphasize the causes and outcome of workplace conflicts from 1923 onward. But they also illuminate the working lives of the claimants and their shop-floor interactions with managers and fellow workers.

This researcher also discovered a wealth of insights from the retired workers who opened their hearts and homes to an inquisitive gringo. Their stories, personalities, and voices bring the human experience to life in the pages that follow. Conducted upon completion of archival research, their interview narrowed gaps in the empirical record by untangling the bewildering events and intriguing characters from Mexico’s ever-changing past. Their oral histories also illuminate the experiences, values, and traditions that fashioned individual consciousness and collective identities. Despite their subjective and fragmentary character, memories do persist, often with remarkable (if selective) clarity. Moreover, unlike traditional sources, informants punctuate their oral testimonies with emphatic gestures, sighs of remorse, and tones of nostalgia. Tenses shift as speakers build their narratives and recollect the past with an eye to the present. Readers should therefore be aware that, when the interviews were recorded, organized labor had evolved into a corrupt appendage of the Mexican state. That widespread sentiment certainly informed retired workers’ views of unionism and union leaders of the past. Furthermore, Mexicans were struggling through a deep economic depression. Such circumstances reinforced the sense of nostalgia with which any retiree reminisces about his or her past. Thus did one informant recall of his working days: “Times were rough, but I’ll always remember the good.”


When General Porfirio Díaz became president in 1876, Monterrey was a city of merchant houses and workshops servicing northeastern Mexico’s mining and agricultural economy. By 1910, when revolution forced the elderly dictator into exile, Monterrey had emerged as the nation’s preeminent industrial center, “Mexico’s Chicago.” Monterrey symbolized and exemplified the Porfirian dream of industrial modernity. The Mexican people had accepted Don Porfirio’s dictatorship as the price for peace. Union and Progress became the hallmark slogans of a regime that parlayed political stability and social order into economic development. Courted by the state, foreign investors financed railroads, factories, a mining revival, and oil exploration. The railroads spurred commercial agriculture, and a land grab ensued. Displaced peasants became rural laborers or rode the rails to find work in fast-growing industrial cities like Monterrey. By 1910, the capital of Nuevo León was the transportation hub of northern Mexico, the region that benefitted most from economic modernization. The railroads helped transform the frontier trading post into a modern city of banks, commerce, and industry. But Porfirian Progress carried a heavy and unacceptable price for the people of Mexico. As Don Porfirio grew old and his regime more repressive, a younger generation clamored for honest elections, workers agitated for industrial democracy, and peasants struggled for the restitution of lands. The wedding of those diverse grievances and social actors prompted the 1910 revolution that drew the old regime to a close.

Regiomontanos and the Regionalist Narrative

As the twentieth century dawned, the people of Monterrey — the regiomontanos — had developed a unique sense of themselves and their place in Mexican society. This regionalism reflected and fostered a proud, self-conscious identification with the city. It manifested itself in cultural, sentimental, and discursive fashions, percolating through regional lore, poetry, folk ballads, and political manifestoes. Regional identity built upon the presumably unique qualities shared by the locals, cultural values that were said to transcend
For generations, Monterrey's civic boosters, captains of industry, public intellectuals, and working-class activists would all promote a regionalist discourse that is a key to understanding the city's history. Regionalism's capacity to resonate with effect owed to the specific moments, social settings, and political arenas in which it operated. To be sure, regionalism's promotion was very often an elite project used to mobilize locals in defense of their own economic interests. But its capacity to cultivate deference among workers or defiance among locals owed to its generalized embrace by all regiomontanos. Monterrey was not alone as a prosperous Latin American city where a sense of regional chauvinism would be built upon claims to greater modernity and industrial progress. What made it unique was that this regionalist discourse became meaningful not only for its elite and middle-class proponents—as in São Paulo—but for working-class people as well. Be they workers or businessmen, men or women, old or young, the regiomontanos all came to share a regional identity founded on their northern Mexican heritage and a patriotic commitment to industrial progress.

As northeños, they shared common values and a distinct way of life that distinguished inhabitants of the northern states from other Mexicans. The northerners take a boastful pride in being independent, hardworking, self-sufficient, and rebellious. Having lived at the margins of central government authority since colonial times, they came to cherish their autonomy and to resent bureaucratic meddling from Mexico City. Theirs became a society “of the self-made man where, compared with central Mexico, achievement counted for more than ascription, where the rich (both Mexican and foreign) could expect bonanzas, and where even the poor enjoyed some mobility and opportunity.” While rarely articulated in an explicit fashion, the northeños’ vision of themselves built upon their critical views of central and southern Mexico: lethargic, submissive, economically backward societies weighed down by an oppressive colonial heritage. Scholars generally attribute these northern “peculiarities”—in varying and often conflicting degrees—to the region’s natural environment, its frontier past, or its proximity to the United States. All of these factors played roles in the region’s distinct

2 Alan Knight, The Mexican Revolution, (2 vols., Cambridge, 1986), I, 10–11. A veteran New York Times reporter later characterized the northeños as “more daring and efficient, more outspoken and informal, even taller and whiter than most Mexicans... (They are) no less proud of their achievements than they are jealous of their independence.” Alan Riding, Distant Neighbors: A Portrait of the Mexicans (New York, 1984), 283.
3 Given the vastness of a region stretching from Tijuana to Tampico, the degree to which ethnicity, the environment, and North American influences weighed on regional identity formation owes as much to scholarly interpretations as to local historical variants. See Anna María Alonso, Thread of
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pattern of economic development and the relative prosperity of the North. Monterrey’s own chroniclers have fashioned a local version of the norteño narrative that bridges centuries of frontier struggle to a twentieth-century story of industrial modernity.

Regional folklore holds that the Spanish colonists who founded Monterrey in 1596 came in search of silver and discovered instead a barren, arid land devoid of natural resources. The colonial outpost languished for generations as an isolated presidio, a fortified trading post that supplied mining towns of the interior with merchandise and contraband from the Gulf Coast. The inhabitants suffered political neglect from Mexico City, weathered a harsh climate, and struggled against hostile, seminomadic Indians. These indios bárbaros, it is said, "gave [the settlers] not a moment of rest," causing "the stagnation of progress." By the mid-nineteenth century, the region’s original inhabitants had succumbed to conquest and assimilation. Indeed, come the twentieth century, census takers would count the smallest indigenous population of any state in Mexico, prompting Governor Porfirio González to boast that, "There are no Indians in Nuevo León!" Despite the governor’s remark, ethnic “whiteness” played no well-articulated role in regional identity formation in late-nineteenth and twentieth-century Monterrey, as it did in the northern states of Sonora or Chihuahua, and certainly had among Monterrey’s Spanish-American colonists in the colonial period.³

Meanwhile, the locals’ heroic resistance during the American occupation (1846–47) and their struggles during the French intervention (1860s) secured their patriotic credentials as Mexican liberals. By then, other chroniclers emphasize, “Nature’s hostility forged a spirit of industry,” and tempered an “enterprising, dynamic, vigorous, [and] sober” character among the regiomontanos. Faced with poor soil and a scarcity of minerals, “the makers


José P. Saldana, Apuntes históricos, 2–3.

Rather, despite the relatively large “white” population recorded by census takers – 20 percent – the regiomontanos seemed to have shared a common sense of mestizaje, the European-Indian roots that most Mexicans claim. Thus did one regiomontano proclaim to his American wife upon witnessing a procession of “Indians” in a local parade: "But this is odd... Because we have no Indians like this here in the North. Our people are all mestizo, and mostly they are factory workers or ranch hands, and they dress in blue jeans and wear shoes." The region’s history of indigenous-settler relations is told by Abraham Nuncio, Visión de Monterrey (Mexico, 1997), 19–59, and Juan Mora-Torres, The Making of the Mexican Border: The State, Capitalism, and Society in Nuevo León, 1848–1910 (Austin, 2001), 14–20; census figures from Departamento de Estadística Nacional, IV Censo de la Población, Vol. 5 (Mexico City, 1927), 17; Governor Porfirio González quoted in El Porvenir, June 17, 1926; Elizabeth Burton de Treviño, My Heart Lies South (New York, 1953), 186–87 (quoted above).