

Cambridge University Press

0521235162 - Revolution from without: Yucatan, Mexico, and the United States,
1880-1924

G. M. Joseph

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

CAMBRIDGE LATIN AMERICAN STUDIES

GENERAL EDITOR
MALCOLM DEAS

ADVISORY COMMITTEE
WERNER BAER MARVIN BERNSTEIN
AL STEPAN BRYAN ROBERTS

42

REVOLUTION FROM WITHOUT
YUCATÁN, MEXICO, AND THE UNITED STATES
1880-1924

Cambridge University Press

0521235162 - Revolution from without: Yucatan, Mexico, and the United States,
1880-1924

G. M. Joseph

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

For a list of books in this series please turn to page 406

Cambridge University Press

0521235162 - Revolution from without: Yucatan, Mexico, and the United States,
1880-1924

G. M. Joseph

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

REVOLUTION FROM WITHOUT

YUCATÁN, MEXICO, AND THE UNITED STATES

1880-1924

G. M. JOSEPH

Department of History

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge

London New York New Rochelle

Melbourne Sydney

Cambridge University Press

0521235162 - Revolution from without: Yucatan, Mexico, and the United States,
1880-1924

G. M. Joseph

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Published by the Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP
32 East 57th Street, New York, NY 10022, USA
296 Beaconsfield Parade, Middle Park, Melbourne 3206, Australia

© Cambridge University Press 1982

First published 1982

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Joseph, Gilbert, 1947–

Revolution from without.

(Cambridge Latin American studies; 42)

Bibliography: p.

Includes index.

1. Yucatán (Mexico) – Rural conditions.
2. Henequen – Mexico – Yucatán – History.
3. Land reform – Mexico – Yucatán – History.
I. Title. II. Series.

HD1795.Y8J67 330.972'65081 81–9958

ISBN 0 521 23516 2

AACR2

Transferred to digital printing 2003

Cambridge University Press

0521235162 - Revolution from without: Yucatan, Mexico, and the United States,
1880-1924

G. M. Joseph

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

To my father and mother

Cambridge University Press

0521235162 - Revolution from without: Yucatan, Mexico, and the United States,
1880-1924

G. M. Joseph

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

There is no truth in the words of strangers.

—Maya prophecy of Chilám Balám

Las cosas de Yucatán,
Dejarlas como están.

(What is Yucatán's own,
Is best left alone.)

—Spanish colonial aphorism

Cambridge University Press

0521235162 - Revolution from without: Yucatan, Mexico, and the United States,
1880-1924

G. M. Joseph

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Contents

List of tables and figures	<i>page</i> ix
Preface	xi
Acknowledgments	xvi
Prologue: Yucatán receives a revolution	i
Part I. The parameters of revolution	
1 Plant and plantation: the development of a monocrop economy	13
2 The henequen boom: oligarchy and informal empire, 1880–1915	33
3 The revolutionary equation within Yucatán: the problem of mobilization	70
Part II. The bourgeois revolution, 1915–1918	
4 Salvador Alvarado and bourgeois revolution from without	93
5 The theory and practice of bourgeois reform: land and the export economy	122
6 The breakdown of bourgeois revolution, 1918–1920	150
Part III. The socialist revolution, 1920–1923	
7 Felipe Carrillo Puerto and the rise of Yucatecan socialism	185
8 The ideology and praxis of a socialist revolution: agrarian reform and the henequen industry	228
9 The failure of revolution from within, 1923–1924	263
Epilogue: Without revolution, 1924– : Yucatán's legacy of frustration	288

Cambridge University Press

0521235162 - Revolution from without: Yucatan, Mexico, and the United States,
1880-1924

G. M. Joseph

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

viii

Contents

Appendix: Agrarian reform, 1915–1927	305
Abbreviations used in notes	308
Notes	311
Select bibliography	373
Index	393

Cambridge University Press

0521235162 - Revolution from without: Yucatan, Mexico, and the United States, 1880-1924

G. M. Joseph

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Tables and figures

Tables

1	The commercial growth of Yucatecan henequen, 1845–1890	<i>page</i> 24
2	The early profitability of henequen cultivation, 1848–1868	25
3	U.S. market prices for Yucatecan henequen, 1875–1914	44
4	Percentage of bales imported to the United States by the leading henequen exporting houses, 1896–1914	56
5	U.S. market prices for henequen, 1915–1925	142
6	Yucatán's loss of the world fiber market, 1880–1950	179
7	<i>Caciquismo</i> in Yucatán, 1917–1924	209
8	Agrarian reform by provisional decree, 1922–1923	239
9	Trends in Yucatecan henequen production, 1913–1923	252
10	Agrarian reform after Carrillo, 1924–1933	290

Figures

1	The state of Yucatán (c. 1925)	<i>page</i> 19
2	Yucatecan political divisions and the modern henequen zone	28
3	Henequen production, 1873–1915	31
4	Henequen prices, 1880–1914	48
5	Molina y Compañía's share of U.S. henequen trade, 1891–1915	52
6	Agrarian reform by provisional decree, 1922–1923	238
A	Yucatán: hectares of land distributed	306
B	Campeche: hectares of land distributed	306
C	Morelos: hectares of land distributed	307
D	Mexican Republic: hectares of land distributed	307

Cambridge University Press

0521235162 - Revolution from without: Yucatan, Mexico, and the United States,
1880-1924

G. M. Joseph

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Preface

In past decades – certainly prior to the events in Cuba in 1959 – the Mexican Revolution was viewed by a majority of scholars and policy makers alike as Latin America’s first and only successful revolutionary experiment. Attention was riveted on such innovative contributions as the *ejido* – hailed as Mexico’s “way out” of its agrarian dilemma – and the PRI, the official Party of the Institutionalized Revolution, which seemed remarkably adept at juggling – and reconciling – such potentially conflicting goals as social justice, economic development, and political stability.¹ Now, as Mexico’s Revolution labors through its seventh decade, increasingly beset by disillusionment and economic difficulties, interest in the Mexican revolutionary model has taken a different form. With the remaining hopes for civilian rule and Western-style democracy flickering dimly throughout the hemisphere, observers on the right reassess Mexico’s one-party system with a view to its continued possibilities for social control combined with some measure of marginal socioeconomic benefits within the context of a corporatist state. Meanwhile, their counterparts on the left, increasingly skeptical about the so-called Mexican economic miracle, probe what they regard to be the limitations of state capitalism and speculate on the possibility of a second, more thoroughgoing revolution, this time waged against the “Revolutionary bourgeoisie,” which, they argue, assumed control but betrayed the goals of the original 1910 upheaval.²

Amid the growing controversy concerning the Revolution’s past performance and future potential, scholars have reached a fundamental consensus: No longer can the Revolution be viewed as a monolithic event. Generalizations made on the basis of informants and documentary materials in Mexico City have clouded the origins and development of the Mexican Revolution for too long. At least during its first two decades, the upheaval that has been called the Revolution was really a series of regional phenomena, some of which deserve perhaps to be called revolutions. Each was governed, to a greater or lesser extent, by a discrete set

Cambridge University Press

0521235162 - Revolution from without: Yucatan, Mexico, and the United States, 1880-1924

G. M. Joseph

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xii

Preface

of local social, economic, political, geographical, and cultural factors. Later, in the 1930s, when the central government of President Lázaro Cárdenas reincorporated the various regions into a new Mexican political system, this process was likewise conditioned by regional factors and circumstances that essentially determined the success or failure of revolutionary reforms.

This study of the Mexican Revolution in Yucatán is intended to add to current efforts by Mexican and international scholars to refine further our knowledge of the disparate phenomena that have come to be known as the Revolution. Historians of the Mexican Revolution are acting increasingly upon what one of them has called the “regionalist impulse of our times”³ while contributing to what is now being acknowledged a historiographical revolution. This “revolution” has witnessed a shift in the locus of historical initiative from the institutional superstructure to the level of local regions, communities, and interest groups. Put another way, there has been a move away from political and institutional history in and from the perspective of the metropolis to social and economic history and the study of political economy in and from the perspective of the periphery.⁴

Thus far, the new regional historiography of the Revolution has taken little notice of Yucatán. Although local historians have been active,⁵ scholars and popular writers outside the peninsula have sought the meaning of the Revolution elsewhere, concentrating upon the victorious caudillo-led armies of the north, the birthplace of the Revolution, and examining the popular social movements of central Mexico, most notably *Zapatismo*, the agrarian movements of Michoacán and Veracruz, and the more widespread *Cristero* rebellion.⁶ In bypassing southeastern Yucatán, national and international historians seem to have concurred with the assessment of regional poet Antonio Mediz Bolio that in Yucatán, “the Revolution appeared as something exotic and strange.”⁷

Any assumption regarding the uniqueness and marginal significance of Yucatán’s revolutionary experience is likely based upon the region’s distant location and its exaggerated reputation for cultural autonomy and political separatism, all of which have become firmly rooted in the Mexican national mind. Certainly, it was said to me, the revolutionary history of a region that Mexicans jokingly refer to as “our sister Republic” and Yucatecans themselves proudly describe as “the country that resembles no other” is not likely to be representative of the Mexican Revolution as a whole. Even if, as has often been said, there is *no* Mexico but *many*

Cambridge University Press

0521235162 - Revolution from without: Yucatan, Mexico, and the United States, 1880-1924

G. M. Joseph

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Preface*

xiii

Mexicos, the Yucatecan variant is generally regarded as more marked in its regional identity than any other entity within the Republic. Among other things, *Yucatecos* eat very different food, wear different clothes, and great numbers continue to speak a vastly different Indian language (Maya) in the countryside than do their central Mexican counterparts, who are the partial product of the Nahua tradition. There are none of Mexico's impressive sierras or even rolling hills, nor any lakes or rivers in Yucatán. Yucatán might best be characterized as a flat sheet of limestone rock, verging at various points upon a desert environment. Poor soil and lack of water discourage most agricultural production, save that of the obstinate, hardy henequen plant, a cactus from which agricultural twines and ropes are made.

It was not until the end of World War II that Yucatecans were even connected by land with the rest of Mexico. Before that, communication by sea with the port of Veracruz often took longer to reach the peninsula than from many points in the United States. In fact, as recently as 1914, Yucatán's rulers petitioned to become a protectorate of the United States, arguing plausibly that they had more in common, geographically and economically, with the North Americans than they did with the Mexican Republic. In Yucatán, the locals often call the Mexicans *gringos* and stubbornly refuse to refer to themselves as *mexicanos*. "Somos yucatecos" – "We are Yucatecans" – they proudly proclaim, revealing the great uneasiness and mistrust that continue to characterize Yucatecan perceptions of, and relations with, Mexico.

It is not surprising, then, that Yucatán's traditional isolation has been extended to the academic realm as well. However, great heuristic value may lie in the study of exceptional regions such as Yucatán. There, and in certain other regions, such as Veracruz, the Revolution developed with a degree of autonomy virtually unmatched elsewhere in Mexico. It was precisely this degree of autonomy that made such regions the kinds of exceptions that bring common revolutionary experiences into focus and enable us better to appreciate the dynamics of the Revolution as a whole.⁸

In certain respects, Yucatán's revolutionary experience diverges from the standard notion and periodization of the Revolution. It was later to arrive, less violent, and probably more radical in its first decade in the peninsula than it was elsewhere in the Republic. Yet although Yucatán seems to have experienced a different revolution, embedded in the Yucatecan case are important implications for understanding the larger revolutionary process,

Cambridge University Press

0521235162 - Revolution from without: Yucatan, Mexico, and the United States, 1880-1924

G. M. Joseph

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

especially as it pertains to such central problems as export dependency and regional development; agrarian reform; mass mobilization and *caciquismo* (bossism); Mexican Revolutionary corporatism and its antecedents; and the relationship between ideology and practice. In a fundamental way, the Yucatecan case reinforces the emerging revisionist interpretation of the character of the larger struggle: a revolution, more often than not, made from above and imposed from without upon Mexico's region's and popular classes; in short, "a revolution initiated, controlled and consummated by 'bourgeois' leadership."⁹

But although the revisionists have cast doubt on the sacrosanct image of a "popular revolution," they have been less successful in documenting *how* the formidable structures of dependent capitalism affecting regional society impeded popular participation and limited the effectiveness of the revolutionary process.¹⁰ In the case of Yucatán, an economy characterized by henequen monoculture tied to an international market controlled by a single North American buyer, the equation of dependency and informal empire is particularly dramatic. At the same time, the larger process, wherein foreign interests penetrated the Mexican economy, collaborating with local elites and regional and national regimes, initially to maintain the Old Regime and ultimately to thwart the revolutionary drive, accurately reflects the history of much of Mexico during the last quarter of the nineteenth century and the first quarter of the twentieth.

Regrettably, the story that follows is largely a case study in failure. One of Mexico's most prosperous, independent states at the turn of the century, Yucatán is today among the Republic's most depressed areas, a region requiring periodic injections of federal aid for its very survival. Although the equation of regional decline is complex, it remains undisputed, among regime spokesmen and critics alike, that the Mexican Revolution has shown relatively few lasting achievements after its first sixty-five years in Yucatán. Inevitably, the Yucatecan example raises larger, more troubling questions, not only about Mexico's revolutionary process but about the fate of revolutionary movements in other Third World regions. What prospect does a monocrop region, heavily dependent upon a fluctuating international market controlled by foreign interests, have of waging a successful social revolution? Will the nation-state play a supportive or undermining economic and political role in the region's struggle for greater economic autonomy and development? And what strategies can local revo-

Cambridge University Press

0521235162 - Revolution from without: Yucatan, Mexico, and the United States,
1880-1924

G. M. Joseph

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Preface*

xv

lutionaries employ as they attempt to make their own history? Must the constraints of the international economy, the national political structure, and the region's social formation inevitably force compromises and alliances on revolutionaries that deflect or ultimately defeat the revolutionary drive?

This book is divided into three major sections. Following a narrative Prologue that orients the reader to the chaotic political landscape of the "epic revolution" (1910–1917), Part I analyzes Yucatán's political economy and social structure during the Old Regime. Potential constraints on the revolutionary process are introduced in terms of a set of intersecting economic and political relationships encompassing Yucatán, Mexico City, and the United States. In Parts II and III, these revolutionary parameters are examined more concretely, insofar as they influenced the first phase of the Yucatecan revolutionary experience (1915–1924) and undermined efforts to bring social change to the region. These six chapters are the core of the book, for they treat the crucial decade during which the revolutionary movements in Yucatán were regarded by many to be the most radical in Mexico. Here we compare two different ideological approaches to Yucatán's central problems of monocrop dependency and informal empire; regionalism and marginalization within the national power structure; and the extremely low level of political mobilization that characterized Yucatecan society. Part II analyzes the temporary successes and ultimate failure of General Salvador Alvarado's attempt to bring social change to Yucatán from the outside via bourgeois revolution (1915–1920). Part III treats the frustration of Governor Felipe Carrillo Puerto's socialist revolution from within (1920–1924) – regarded by many to be the first serious Marxist revolution in the Americas. Finally, the Epilogue brings Yucatán's revolutionary experience up to date, giving special attention to the contemporary legacy of the massive agrarian reform that came to mark the Revolution's second phase under the national leadership of President Lázaro Cárdenas (1934–1940). Here, too, emphasis is placed upon the Mexican Revolution's failure to achieve in Yucatán many of the goals of social justice and economic development that it set for itself and upon the structural constraints on the revolutionary process.

GILBERT M. JOSEPH

Cambridge University Press

0521235162 - Revolution from without: Yucatan, Mexico, and the United States, 1880-1924

G. M. Joseph

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Acknowledgments

To express personal gratitude to everyone who helped make this work possible might require the preparation of a second volume. Some special thanks are due, however. My research and writing in Mexico and the United States, 1974–1976, were facilitated by a Foreign Area Fellowship provided by the Social Science Research Council. The eighteen months of actual research were made more efficient by the efforts of a number of skilled and patient archivists. In Chicago, J. H. Henn and Greg Lennes guided me through the recently indexed archives of the International Harvester Company. In Cambridge, Massachusetts, Robert Lovett, director of the Harvard School of Business Administration's Baker Library, introduced me to several important collections that highlighted the cordage interests of lesser North American corporations. In Washington, D.C., and Suitland, Maryland, the staffs of the Library of Congress and the National Archives were largely responsible for making my foray into the dense thicket of diplomatic, military, commercial, and personal papers a manageable adventure. In Mexico City, the (then) director of the Archivo General de la Nación, Lic. Jorge Ignacio Rubio Mañé, a *Yucateco*, steered me to important collections and counseled me on a number of sensitive points regarding the people of his region. Berta Ulloa and her staff at the Archivo de la Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores and the archivists at the Centro de Estudios de Historia de Mexico, Con-dumex, were especially helpful in locating documentary collections illuminating the early years of the Revolution in Mexico and Yucatán.

In Mérida, *Yucatecos* Lic. Luis López Rivas (Archivo General del Estado), Lic. Rodolfo Ruz Menéndez (Universidad de Yucatán), Lic. Clemente López Trujillo, and Don Pedro Castro Aguilar (Hemeroteca "Pino Suárez"), through their encyclopedic knowledge, courtesy, and good sense of humor, did much to keep my research project and spirits afloat. Their camaraderie was refreshing and, indeed, often vital in order to endure a succession of work

Cambridge University Press

0521235162 - Revolution from without: Yucatan, Mexico, and the United States, 1880-1924

G. M. Joseph

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Acknowledgments*

xvii

days when it was 95 degrees in the shade! The recent surge of interest in Yucatecan history by Mexicans and foreigners owes more to these modest, energetic men than can be acknowledged here. Thanks also go to North American businessman Richard Hedlund, Sr., who opened his private library to me. It contains perhaps the world's most extensive collection of materials on henequen and cordage. The hours I spent drawing upon his broad knowledge of the fiber business, gained from years in the trade, have proved invaluable for telling the story that follows.

There are many intellectual debts as well. Richard Morse, Emilia Viotti da Costa, and Robin Winks, the professors who advised me at Yale, each emphasized a different thematic and methodological approach to my project while encouraging me to explore other approaches. North Carolina colleagues Joseph Tulchin, Leon Fink, and Carl Pletsch and Mexicanists John Womack, Friedrich Katz, David Brading, Juan Felipe Leal, and Barry Carr each provided helpful insights in the research or writing phases of the project. My fellow participants at the University of Cambridge's international conference on "Peasant and Caudillo in Modern Mexico" – including Raymond Buve, Hans Werner Tobler, Alan Knight, and Héctor Aguilar Camín – made constructive suggestions regarding my material on *caciquismo* and the Carrillo Puerto regime. Fellow *yucatólogos* Philip Thompson, Robert Patch, A. J. G. Knox, Michael Fallon, Diane Roazen, Allen Wells, and Ramón Chacón listened, discussed, and shared data. The warm and generous support of the last three, in particular, demands extra thanks. I must also express my special gratitude to writer Julia Preston, a dear friend and a demanding critic, whose knowledge of Latin American issues and command of the English language rescued me time and again from both conceptual and literary mishaps. The insight and rigor of her critique of the manuscript at several stages were instrumental in shaping a dissertation into a book. All of these friends and colleagues helped make this a better volume. I alone, however, bear responsibility for its shortcomings.

For their care and cheer in typing the manuscript at various stages, I wish to thank Mary Cash, Patricia Reeve, and Jean Holke.

Finally, I would surely be remiss if I failed to acknowledge the guidance of the numerous *Yucatecos* with whom I spoke. Veteran *revolucionarios* and latter-day Party officials, henequen workers and

Cambridge University Press

0521235162 - Revolution from without: Yucatan, Mexico, and the United States,
1880-1924

G. M. Joseph

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xviii

Acknowledgments

Meridano intellectuals, former *hacendados* and current *caciques*, local businessmen and student leaders – each took time to tell his story and, in the process, to explain why the promise of the Revolution has not yet been fulfilled in Yucatán. I only hope I have been equal to the task of retelling their story here.