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Unintended Lessons of Revolution: Student Teachers and Political Radicalism in Twentieth-Century Mexico . By Tanalís Padilla

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### Author

Aguilar, Kevan Antonio

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*Unintended Lessons of Revolution: Student Teachers and Political Radicalism in Twentieth-Century Mexico.* By Tanalís Padilla (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022. 376 pp. \$28.95).

Student activism has long been a crucial line of inquiry in the study of radicalism in the twentieth century. Most historical works have focused on the urban-based student movements that emerged during the global uprisings of 1968. In *Unintended Lessons of Revolution*, Tanalís Padilla shifts our attention away from city-based student movements and instead analyzes the *escuelas normales* (normal schools), rural boarding schools that trained the children of campesinos to be teachers in the Mexican countryside. The normalista schools made international headlines when, on September 26, 2014, Mexican security forces intercepted a group of students from the Ayotzinapa Rural Teachers College as they attempted to commandeer buses in Iguala, Guerrero for an upcoming march in Mexico City. By the end of the night, six were dead and forty-three students were disappeared, with state officials claiming that a local drug cartel was responsible for the disappearances. Despite the government's claims, protests broke out across Mexico and then around the world, unified in their charge: "*fue el estado*" ("it was the state") that was responsible for the atrocity. It is within the shadow of Ayotzinapa that Tanalís Padilla situates her study of normalista radicalism and its challenge to the Mexican state.

*Unintended Lessons of Revolution* provides readers with a *long durée* examination of normalista activism throughout the twentieth century. The book covers three specific time periods: the foundation of the rural normales during the 1920s and 1930s; the years of Mexico's economic miracle (1940-1968); and the post-Tlatelolco guerrilla insurgencies of the 1970s. National in its scope, *Unintended Lessons of Revolution* places rural student activism within broader discussions on the nature of the Mexican Revolution, the Cold War, and the seventy-one years of

one-party rule under the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (Institutional Revolutionary Party, PRI).

From the inception of the escuelas normales, state officials envisioned rural student teachers as intermediaries between the state and peasant communities. Through the advancement of “socialist education” initiatives in the countryside, student teachers were tasked to promote literacy, hygiene, civic engagement, and racial immersion among the nation’s largely Indigenous peasantry. During the administration of President Lázaro Cárdenas (r. 1934-1940), the rural normales took on a more explicitly revolutionary purpose. Student curriculum and teaching promoted a historical materialist interpretation of Mexican history, politics, and society, thus reaffirming the student teachers as agents of social change.

Padilla frames post-Cárdenas administrations’ rightward shift in education policies through the lens of Latin America’s “century of revolution.” Whereas the rural normales were initially established to advance the government’s revolutionary initiatives, post-Cárdenas administrations initiated several reforms for normalista students to prioritize academic instruction over community engagement (chapters 3 and 4). Reforms included attempts to eliminate the rural normales’ coeducational dormitories, the elimination of socialist pedagogical practices, and the professionalization of rural teachers to complement their urban counterparts. Despite these efforts, normalista students mobilized against the state’s new policies, distinguishing their visions of rural education from that of the counterrevolutionary initiatives advanced by presidential administrations in the 1940s through the 1960s.

State officials responded to the revolutionary activism of normalista students through a variety of tactics, including coercion, cooptation, and physical repression. Padilla convincingly challenges previous scholars' efforts to define the PRI's repressive tactics through the language of "soft" and "hard" dictatorships (*dictablandas* vs. *dictaduras*), arguing instead that the state utilized both symbolic and physical violence to maintain its political power (14). State officials and opponents of the *escuelas normales* frequently characterized the students as ungrateful for the opportunity to obtain social mobility as educators and, more damningly, as subversives lured by foreign communist influences. When words and reactionary reforms did not suffice, the state repressed student activism through beatings, imprisonments, and assassinations. Rather than fall in line, normalista students became increasingly more militant in response to the state's coercive practices. When legal means of protest were coopted, disrupted, or outright abolished, some normalista students joined the ranks of the guerrilla insurgencies that sprouted up throughout the country in the 1960s and 1970s. Taking inspiration from the Cuban Revolution and national liberation struggles in Africa and Southeast Asia, student teachers described their aspirations as part of an ongoing struggle against capitalism, imperialism, and the increasing authoritarianism of the PRI regime.

Perhaps the most innovative aspect of *Unintended Lessons of Revolution* is Padilla's skillful use of oral testimonies to demonstrate how students' political consciousness developed. Whereas men recalled the catharsis of protests and participation in agrarian struggles, women's testimonies noted the additional labor expected of them due to ascribed gender norms. Women students were expected to cook their own meals, manage domestic upkeep in ways men at the schools did, and were also subjected to unwanted attention of teachers. These experiences

informed many women's activism in school as well as their subsequent involvement in guerrilla movements (chapter 5). Padilla also documents the unique ways that Indigenous students were politicized in rural normales located in the southern states of Chiapas and Oaxaca. Indigenous student testimonials emphasize the pressures they felt in school to assimilate to mestizo culture and to learn Spanish. However, Indigenous students' testimonies also described how their exposure to student activism inspired them to organize in defense of Indigenous language, culture, and practices (174). In centering the experiences of women and Indigenous students, Padilla offers a richer understanding of the spectrum of students' political activism and how it inspired subsequent social movements.

*Unintended Lessons of Revolution* is a wonderful contribution to the rich historiography of agrarian history and student radicalism in Mexico. While I am hard pressed to find any substantial criticisms of the book, one wishes that Padilla would have compared the political consciousness of normalista students to other student movements that were active throughout Latin America at the same time and have recently been written about by scholars such as Victoria Langland (Brazil), Marian Schlotterbeck (Chile), and Heather Vrana (Guatemala). Notwithstanding this minor critique, *Unintended Lessons of Revolution* is an excellent book to inspire such comparative studies of student radicalism under revolutionary and counterrevolutionary regimes.

Kevan Antonio Aguilar  
University of California, Irvine  
aguilar.kevan@gmail.com