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Summer Research Summary Report – Tinker 2012

Project Title: “Voluntary Associations and the Mexican Middle Class, 1920-1960”

Over the past summer, I conducted archival research in three Mexican cities: Tijuana, Mexico City, and Puebla. The purpose of this trip was to identify archives and libraries as well as establish contacts that will be useful for my dissertation. Locating my primary sources was a crucial step because it determines the viability of my proposed project.

My dissertation asks how voluntary associations, such as the Rotary Club, Lions Club, professional organizations, photography clubs, immigrant associations, and a host of others that were organized beginning in the 1920s became politicized, that is, made the transformation, over the next half century or so, from social, service, or group activity clubs to participants in politics. Students of voluntarism have shown that middle-class people during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries tended to be “joiners” of voluntary organizations. According to my preliminary research over two summers, Mexico was no exception: a majority of these clubs was composed of men (and their wives and female relatives, in parallel women’s organizations) with quintessentially middle-class origins and occupations (small businessmen, lawyers, pharmacists and doctors, teachers, etc.). The dissertation, then, offers a concrete path by which to approach the difficult question of middle-class formation, identity, and politicization in twentieth-century Mexico.

The research project is guided by three basic questions. First, what kinds of voluntary associations emerged in Mexican cities from the 1920s to the 1960s? Second, what kind of people joined them and for what purpose? And third, what forms of sociability were practiced and how were political, cultural, and gender values constructed in these clubs?

This dissertation begins in the 1920s, after the most violent stages of the revolution, and concludes with the end of the “Mexican miracle” in the late 1960s. This time frame is intended to trace the rise of middle class (and elite) participation in club life in the decades leading up to Mexico’s economic boom, which began in the 1940s. The project is situated in three quite different cities: the northwest, border city of Tijuana, the western capital of Guadalajara, and the city of Puebla to the east of Mexico City. Economically, Puebla had a strong textile industry; Guadalajara relied on agribusiness and later manufacturing; and Tijuana depended on tourism around the U.S.-Mexico border. Culturally, both Puebla and Guadalajara were colonial cities that were deeply influenced by the Catholic Church, while Tijuana developed much later in the 1920s without such a strong Catholic heritage. The cross-regional approach, then, intends to provide a nuanced view of middle-class cultural and political life.

The project engages two bodies of scholarship: the first is on the role of civil societies and the second on middle-class formation and political practices. Social scientists (most notably Carlos Forment) have pointed to the rise of these associations as an important part of the formation of civil society and the emergence of democratic traditions and political modernity in Latin America. This dissertation values this scholarship and also considers voluntary associations as spaces where middle-class individuals constructed cultural identities in addition to political ones.

The project engages not only the theoretical literature on civil society and volunteerism, but also a historiography that focuses on the middle classes during Mexico’s era of rapid industrialization and economic growth. Historians and social scientists have referred to this as the period of the “Mexican miracle,” and they have argued that one of the effects of this “miracle” was the expansion and later the politicization of the middle classes. While these scholars have made valuable insights, they have centered their attention on Mexico City and student culture. Further, these studies generally have equated “politicization” with left-wing politics, particularly the 1968 student movement. This dissertation will contribute towards this discussion by considering other forms of middle-class politics in three cities outside the nation’s capital: Guadalajara, Puebla, and Tijuana.

The internal documents of various voluntary associations, which I consulted over the past summer, constitute my most important sources. In Puebla City, I surveyed the archives of two mutual-aid societies, the association of textile producers, a hunting league, the Rotary Club, and the first Mexican service club, the Sowers of Friendship. During my research trip in Tijuana, I identified archives from the Lions Club, the Rotary Club, and a mutual-aid society. Newspaper and other periodical sources, which I consulted the past summer at the Hemeroteca Nacional and the Miguel Lerdo de Tejada Library in Mexico City, indicate the presence of many volunteer associations in Guadalajara, strongly suggesting that similar collections exist for that city. To varying degrees, these archives (the vast majority of which have never been consulted by researchers) all contain correspondence, minutes, internal publications, photographs, and in some cases even audio recordings. These sources will be essential for this study because they show the inner workings of the particular association (including policy discussions, which can reveal early interest in entering into the political arena), as well as the social backgrounds and everyday lives of its members.

Government archives are also relevant for this project. In the case of the municipal and state archives of Puebla and Tijuana, this summer I found rosters, correspondence, and communiqués from multiple organizations. These repositories will also be useful, not only for learning about the groups themselves, but also for analyzing the relations between these and the city and state governments. Finally, newspapers such as *El Occidental* and *El Sol* of Guadalajara, the *El Heraldo* of Tijuana, and *El Sol* of Puebla all contain a wealth of information. Starting in the 1940s, these local publications regularly featured club news, announcements, and paid insertions.

The next step will be to follow up in 2013 for an extended period of time, returning to many of the associations that I visited and more that I did not have time to approach this summer. Overall, my findings and the contacts I established, both at these voluntary organizations and with local researchers (in the case of the Universidad Autónoma de Puebla), motivate me to pursue this dissertation project further.