

# Wagadu: A Journal of Transnational Women's & Gender Studies

---

Volume 7  
Issue 1 *Today's Global Flâneuse*

Article 10

---

6-1-2009

## Review of Revolutionary Women in Postrevolutionary Mexico by Jocelyn Olcott, Duke University Press, Durham, 2005.

Gianfranco Piccone

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.cortland.edu/wagadu>



Part of the [History of Gender Commons](#), [Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Studies Commons](#), [Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies Commons](#), and the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Piccone, Gianfranco (2009) "Review of Revolutionary Women in Postrevolutionary Mexico by Jocelyn Olcott, Duke University Press, Durham, 2005.," *Wagadu: A Journal of Transnational Women's & Gender Studies*: Vol. 7: Iss. 1, Article 10.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.cortland.edu/wagadu/vol7/iss1/10>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Cortland. It has been accepted for inclusion in Wagadu: A Journal of Transnational Women's & Gender Studies by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Cortland. For more information, please contact [DigitalCommonsSubmissions@cortland.edu](mailto:DigitalCommonsSubmissions@cortland.edu).

**Review of *Revolutionary Women in Postrevolutionary Mexico* by Jocelyn Olcott, Duke University Press, Durham, 2005**

Gianfranco Piccone

Cleveland State University

Based on three rich case studies, Jocelyn Olcott's book *Revolutionary Women in Postrevolutionary Mexico* brings together a comparative analysis on Mexican women's political participation during the period of "long Cardenismo"—from Lázaro Cárdenas' 1928 instauration as Michoacán's governor until the 1940 initiation of Avila's Camacho presidency (p. 24). The book's thesis states that Mexican men and women experienced citizenship as "gendered", as "contingent to specific historical and political contexts", and "less as a legal framework than a set of social, cultural, and political processes" (p. 6). Olcott's research rediscovers a comprehensive history of feminist social movements and demonstrates that Mexican women were politically organized revolutionary citizens, in spite of the sexist social order of that time.

With concomitant attention to regional, national, and transnational contexts, this study surveys competing gender ideologies during a period of state-formation. It draws on individual and collective stories of feminine political organizing, rather than relying on official discourses, to approach the specificities of women's performance of citizenship. Olcott's non-linear work of historiography combines materials from national and regional archives, popular histories, and public epistles. The three main case studies presented in the book cover regions with contrasting characters: the central state of Michoacán, the northern region of Comarca Lagunera, and the southeastern Mayan state of Yucatán. In addition, the author surveys the national implications of radicalism in the port city of Acapulco, and feminist political organizing in Mexico City.

The book's first chapter surveys the roots of Mexican feminist political organizing. It starts out by tracing women's activism for expanded social, economic, and political rights back to the time of the Revolution. It periodizes the First Feminist Congress in Yucatán in 1916, which was able to garner more than seven hundred women in Mérida, as the formal origin of organized feminine political mobilization. Culminating with discussions on the national women's congresses of the early 1930s, this chapter states that by that time, although "contested and fragmented" (p. 51) a national women's movement had developed.

In this same chapter, a discussion on the 1917 Constitutional Congress focuses its attention on the citizenship articles, finally rejecting women's suffrage. A reference to the Catholic Cristero Rebellion in Michoacán as "recasting women's piety from antimodern to potentially violent and disruptive" (p. 41), portrays the tensions between competing gender ideologies formulated by the government's anticlerical project on one side, and the Church on the other. Finally overcome by the ruling party, the end of the Cristero Rebellion consolidated Cárdenas' mandate as Michoacán's governor.

Chapter two surveys the trajectory of women's organizing in Michoacán during the 1920s and early 1930s. It gives attention to the role of the state-founded Revolutionary Labor Confederation of Michoacán (CRMDT) and other associations at linking the national bureaucracy with local organizations, which rendered women support and leadership for political organizing. Women's political organizing was thus concomitantly dependent on regional and national political scenarios. While Cardenismo offered women opportunities for organizing, feminist mobilizing was, however, constrained by national and regional structures of power and their respective political agendas.

Chapter three pays attention to the national women's movement of the 1930s, with emphasis on the performance of educators and organizers as mediators between disparate factions of feminist mobilizing. Again, tensions between church officials and the state increased at the national level, as "socialist" teachers were in charge of practicing new pedagogies. This chapter also

briefly explores the influence that radicalism in Acapulco and the PCM (*Partido Comunista Mexicano*) exercised over women activists who would then move and participate across regional contexts.

Chapter four explores the role of agricultural labor mobilizations in the northern region of Comarca Lagunera. It gives attention to political interaction between national and regional government authorities, as this was crucial to negotiate the tensions of the 1936 General Strike. According to Olcott, the PCM and the General Strike “defined the contours of popular organizing in the Comarca Lagunera” (124).

Chapter five surveys women’s mobilization for obtaining suffrage rights, ultimately failing to achieve its aim. The last chapter turns to Yucatán where the mobilization of women ended with no major favorable outcomes. Women’s organizing in Yucatán was inevitably frustrated due to unstable regional political climates.

Mexican women would not vote in a presidential election until 1958. Furthermore, the suffrage victory was not linked to popular mobilization but instead to state patronage, “transform[ing] its meaning and honoring women as political housekeepers rather than revolutionary citizens” (p. 234). However, through historical revision, Olcott’s work contributes at uncovering a history silenced by hegemonic discourses and at revealing the manipulation of events by state authorities, which sought to render women into submission.

This study gives voice to the silenced accomplishments of a feminist movement that were often appropriated and interpreted deliberately by the government’s hegemonic project. The book does a great job when explaining, with comparative examples, how the dynamics of state patronage were effective at appropriating the outcomes of women’s social mobilization. It also successfully portrays the many contradictions embodied in Cardenismo, among these that of fomenting women’s organizing while also indecorously negating from history its political victories.

*Revolutionary Women in Postrevolutionary Mexico* is an extraordinary work of exhaustive research dealing with crucial

questions about the dynamics of (feminist) social movements, the roles of official discourses and popular mobilization within the process of state formation, and the rise and fall of Cardenismo in Mexico. The book can be used in specialized (graduate) classes from disciplines such as anthropology, cultural studies, ethnic and gender studies, history, Latin American studies, sociology, and so forth. It may be used as well in courses that may seek to offer a comparative approach on women's political experiences across transnational contexts. The book's three main case studies provide a rich account of feminist social mobilization that can be of significance to any scholar interested in the diverse experiences of women's political participation across Latin America and the world at large during critical times of hegemonic consolidation.