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Elisa Cárdenas Ayala (ed.) (2015)

**Pasados vivos. Miradas jóvenes sobre la historia de Chiapas**

Guadalajara, Jalisco: Universidad de Guadalajara, 373 páginas.

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The coordinator of this volume, Elisa Cárdenas Ayala, is well known among scholars for her inspiring works on the obscure local history of the Mexican Independence movements (e.g. *El derrumbe. Jalisco, microcosmos de la Revolución mexicana*, 2010). Currently, she is a Professor of History at the University of Guadalajara (Jalisco, Mexico). Her research encompasses social movements, micro-history and the construction of identity in Mexico. For the volume at hand, she gathers 15 term papers written by students of the Intercultural University of Chiapas. As stated in the final chapter of the book (p. 365-373), this institution was founded in 2004. It is dedicated to the process of decolonization by explicitly addressing indigenous youth and emphasizing indigenous knowledge as a cultural resource for academic research.

The present volume originated in a seminar on "Writing history" in 2011, in which 16 students of the Intercultural University were guided by Cárdenas Ayala to do their own fieldwork in San Cristóbal de las Casas (Chiapas) and surrounding villages. Cárdenas Ayala conducted a

similar project in 2009 at the community of Mezcala de la Asunción (Jalisco, Mexico) with 106 children between 6 and 10 years of age. As the editor describes in her introduction to *Pasados vivos*, the children's contributions, like those of the students, demonstrate the binding and motivating power of complementary versions of history in local settings and the strong link between historical memory and collective identity. Cárdenas Ayala wants to inspire young people to seek alternative versions of history. Her aim is to challenge established ideas of history, which have been shaped by structures of power.

Her assumption that didactic efforts towards history and historical consciousness have failed is fundamental in her work, although not very flattering for the Mexican national education system. The majority of Mexican citizens today regard history as profoundly boring and a useless topic.

Based on this harsh critique, she explains how the past can be explored by physical experience, as – according to her – we all carry history in our bodies and convey it

through our everyday gestures. In fact, some of the contributions are precisely dedicated to this 'physical experience of history', such as the first student contribution, *Caminando la ciudad*, by Karen Liliana Pérez Martínez (p. 21-42). Pérez Martínez describes her walks by day and night in the city of San Cristóbal de las Casas in a very personal and emotional account, remembering some local personalities and the daily life routine.

A second strong point of Cárdenas Ayala's work is her attention to generational differences with regard to the perception and expression of memory. The students in her 2011 seminar were encouraged to conduct interviews with people of different ages. Those contributions are ethnographic in nature, as they introduce the geographic, historic and economic setting of particular villages around San Cristóbal de las Casas. They mention not only people's daily struggle for survival in situations of constant economic stress, but also assign individual voices to them. The aim is to demonstrate that local people – although extremely detached from historic archives and academic writing – complement our notion of historical developments by telling us how they experienced certain historical events and what they meant to their families.

A well-written example is the work of Luis Enrique Antonio Niño, *De Oriente a Occidente. La inmigración japonesa a México* (p. 91-110). Political interests brought Japanese farmers to Mexican rural areas in the second half of the 19th

century. Starting from the more general national history, the author describes the arrival and development of the Japanese community in the municipality of Acacoyagua (Chiapas). Interviews with the descendants of those Japanese settlers reveal local versions and combine them with national and regional histories, thus providing an illustrative historical and ethnographic account of this specific part of Mexican history. Another excellent example in this regard is the work of Jonathan Zárate Teco on the gay community in San Cristóbal de las Casas (p. 311-335). He discusses the social and legal struggle for acceptance and equal treatment of gay communities in Mexico and relates these developments with the situation in Chiapas: while gay travelers are tolerated, local gay communities are disregarded.

A meticulous as well as very entertaining work is the historiographical study of María Elisena Sánchez Román on the Comitán heroine Josefina Garcia, who is said to have triggered the Chiapas Independence Movement in 1821 (p. 111-135). Although commemorated at several public sites, today neither her origin nor her personal ideas are well known. Thus, the author undertook the difficult task of discovering more about this courageous woman. She screened local archives, visited places and interviewed historians and local residents in search for more information. She describes the research process as very frustrating, at times. At some point in her research, she desperately questioned if the woman had ever even lived. However,

at the end, she is triumphantly able to explain the whereabouts of Josefina Garcia.

This contribution shows another very important aspect and outcome of the coordinator's work: to motivate youngsters to look at the history of people and things which have been forgotten, neglected, or marginalized. Besides women such as Josefina Garcia, these people are experts on embroidered blouses and female potters, or have been completely forgotten, and of whom only indigenous name-giving patterns give evidence today (p. 263-284). Further topics of these nearly forgotten histories are the radio station XERA-Radio Uno (p. 167-190), the development of coffee production (p. 191-216), marimba music (p. 217-238), or local amber processing (p. 239-262).

Although at some points it resembles student course work, the volume calls attention to local versions of history against the national background. This makes it most valuable for historians and ethnographers working on Mexico, particularly on Chiapas. It is also very useful to readers interested in the elaboration of local and indigenous histories. Unfortunately, for the moment, the first edition is sold out and copies are hard to get. Hopefully, a broader audience and attention to the work will solve this problem in the near future.