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“Knowledge and Wisdom”

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*Un hombre de libros: homenaje a Ernesto de la Torre Villar*

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## KNOWLEDGE AND WISDOM

JOHN M. HART

I met Dr. Ernesto de la Torre Villar in the winter of 1968 when I arrived in Mexico City to research my doctoral dissertation for the UCLA history department. Employing his historical insight, knowledge of the archives, and subtle command of Mexican history, he was very important to the success of my efforts.

My doctoral project was very problematic. Contrary to other U.S. historians of Mexico, I believed that the Mexican labor movement not only had origins independent of the revolutionary party, but that it had stressed auto gestion in its beginnings. My ideas were based on my experience as a worker in Los Ángeles, California, where I grew up with Mexican-Americans and attended East Los Ángeles Junior College with them. My perspective contradicted the prevailing perspective among historians in the EE.UU. that Mexican workers were “inconcientes”, that the Casa del Obrero Mundial was a “cultural club”, and that the labor movement originated with the revolutionary elites in 1917. My view also contrasted with the interpretation offered by Mexican Marxist-Leninist historians such as Manuel Díaz Ramírez who recognized that the labor movement had nineteenth century origins, but who held that it derived from a small group of Marxist leaders.

After studying Spanish anarchism with Professor Stanley G. Payne at UCLA, I expected to find anarchist exiles from Barcelona and Andalusia contributing their ideas to the early Mexican labor movement. My own view was that both the labor movement and Zapatista-type agrarianism had developed from Mexican artisan and pueblo values in conjunction with European ideas that confirmed already operative Mexican working-class and rural practices. I also thought that the nineteenth-century workers’ revolutionary consciousness took shape in competition with government efforts to control and repress them. Unfortunately, I had very little understanding of the archives in Mexico City or where to find information

relevant to the origins of working-class resistance to the rise of Mexican capitalism.

After experiencing some success in finding the secondary literature I needed at the library of El Colegio de México located on calle Guanajuato, I still lacked primary source materials that would prove my case regarding the nineteenth century origins of the labor and agrarian movement. In addition, I felt that my Spanish was very poor, so I was too embarrassed to even approach let alone ask for the help of the formidable Daniel Cosío Villegas who I encountered from time to time in El Colegio building. Instead, hoping to remain invisible, I went to the Biblioteca Nacional on Isabel la Católica street. A fellow graduate student had told me that the Caja Fuerte of the National Library contained the papers of Benito Juárez, and might lend me solid information regarding my theory that as early as the 1860s European anarchism, not Marxism or trade unionism, had served as a central catalyst, perhaps even the dominant force, in motivating the early organizers and members of the Mexican labor movement.

My structuralist educational background, however, did not prepare me for my first intensive discussion regarding my project with a Mexican historian, Dr. Ernesto De la Torre Villar. When I arrived at the National Library in March 1968 the secretary informed me that I could not enter the Caja Fuerte until I obtained a letter of recommendation from a recognized member of the academic community and presented myself to the director to be interviewed. I obtained a pro-forma letter from one of the secretaries at El Colegio de México signed by a member of the Mexico History Department. Armed with the letter I returned, with trepidation, and made an appointment to meet the Director of the Biblioteca Nacional.

A few days later, I was waiting outside his office when he arrived. He was a striking figure as he entered the room, wearing a dark suit with a white handkerchief, and offering a friendly greeting to the secretary. Then he called me in to explain my project and my need to use the Caja Fuerte. It was an hour I will never forget. I began by mentioning that I had discovered Plotino Rhodakanaty, a teacher who had studied Fourier and Proudhon in Paris and had further explored auto gestión and *asambleas populares* in Barcelona before coming to Mexico in 1861 to disseminate “la Idea Santa.”

After I had spoken for a few moments he began to lean forward with his index finger of the left hand pointed up his face, the other fingers closed, and the thumb extended under the chin. A slight, perhaps bemused smile, was on his face. He asked me where my

ideas came from. I told him, adding that I thought many Spanish anarchists had come to Mexico because I found them being exiled from Spain while I was working for Dr. Payne in the UCLA library newspaper morgue searching its collection of Spanish publications. He informed me that I might not find many Spanish anarchists but, “Yes, indeed” there were some materials regarding uprisings in the late 1860s in the Caja Fuerte and that I should especially look for the reports regarding rural social unrest in the Valley of Mexico, including the area around Chalco. Then, after telling him how disappointed I was in not having found materials pertinent to my project in the Archivo General de la Nación, he leaned back, thought for a while, and told me to look for the ramo “Tranquilidad Pública”. Then, he said that I should go to the Hermeroteca Nacional in the old church of San Pedro y San Pablo and look for the old newspaper *El Socialista* and the archive of the Casa del Obrero Mundial. I never found the latter collection, however, and that is a story in itself. During the remainder of the year we rarely encountered each other except in passing. Once in a while, he would ask how my project was coming. I returned to UCLA at the end of the year, quite proud of my discoveries.

Years later, as time went on, and I began to train my own graduate students, I realized how De la Torre Villar had wisely recognized the possibilities in my project, patiently tolerated my linguistic inabilities, and guided me to the places where I could make my own discoveries. I regret not having spent more time with him, but in that hour he gave me more than invaluable research advice. He provided me with an example of the scholarly wisdom needed in order to hear people out and then give them the help they need in order to reach a higher level.



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