

*The Last Good Neighbor: Mexico in the Global Sixties*. Eric Zolov. Durham: Duke University Press, 2020. xiii + 424 pp. Paperback ISBN: 9781478006206.

Eric Zolov has written a book that sheds a large amount of new light on a relatively little-studied period (late 1950s-mid 1960s), to the great benefit of several subfields, for which it is sure to become an obligatory text. He demonstrates that this was a critically important time in Mexico's domestic politics and its foreign relations, and especially within its inordinately complicated relationship with the United States. His evidence is drawn from close study of politics and diplomacy (using archival collections of multiple countries), but also of journalism, literature and social movements, giving a multidimensional and novel understanding of Mexico's relations with the United States and the world at large. Zolov insists that even as Mexico remained the United States' most important ally in Latin America during the Cold War, Mexico also "pivoted" outwards to actively engage with the rest of the world.

Above all, this book is an unprecedentedly clear account of the ways in which Mexico was both uniquely free and at the same time meaningfully limited in its diplomatic relations with the rest of the world because of its "Good Neighbor" relationship with the United States during the height of the Cold War. Zolov uses the Good Neighbor Policy of the 1930s and the relationships the United States sought to forge throughout Latin America as the principal frame for understanding the unique bilateral relationship between the United States and Mexico in the decades that followed. Yet, perhaps his most apt descriptor of this idiosyncratic, challenging, and yet mutually beneficial relationship is as a "strategic symbiosis" (p. 293). The most important insight of this book is the degree to which both countries ultimately compromised in the interest of insuring the long-term stability of their relationship. Zolov shows that under president Adolfo López Mateos (1958-64), Mexico assiduously sought to maintain its "special" relationship with the United States, but also to assert Mexican sovereignty and independence from the United States. It was, he writes, "a diplomatic bond upon which a broader strategy of global diversification paradoxically depended" (p. 81). Much of the book is dedicated to explaining this paradox. For instance, Zolov shows that Mexico's support for communist Cuba's right to political self-determination set an important precedent for its Cold War era diplomacy, but Mexico also carefully avoided antagonizing the United States by not joining the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), even while openly supporting it. Likewise, he emphasizes that while Mexico and the Soviet Union shared aspirations as well as revolutionary heritage, there were clear limits to how much either country could or would pursue closer working relations based on those commonalities. Symbolic gestures were one thing, but practice was sometimes another.

Zolov also gives us critically important insights into Mexico's diplomacy beyond its relationship to the United States. Via a masterful, guided tour through its relations with not just the Soviet Union and Cuba, but also with countries such as India and Yugoslavia and with the NAM and other global conferences, he shows Mexico actively sought recognition as an important, independent player on the global stage while trying to diversify its foreign trade and investment. He also shows how Mexican revolutionary nationalism both shaped and complicated its foreign

relations, particularly following the Cuban revolution, which transformed Latin American conceptions of revolutionary politics in ways that proved especially challenging for a country ruled by a semi-authoritarian “revolutionary” single party, and which maintained a close working relationship with the United States. Zolov argues that Mexico’s greatly expanded engagement with many countries in this period laid crucial groundwork for its foreign relations in the 1970s and 1980s, making this an important work for scholars of Mexican diplomacy of that era even though that is outside this book’s periodization.

Throughout, Zolov uses individuals to illustrate larger points about the various forces that shaped Mexico’s foreign relations and domestic politics. Most prominent is former president Lázaro Cárdenas (1934–40), whom Zolov argues was the one person capable of uniting a deeply divided Mexican left in the 1950s and 60s. He demonstrates that Cárdenas was both empowered and hampered in his leadership of the left by his ongoing, ultimately supportive relationship with the state and the sitting president. Similarly, Zolov presents Carlos Fuentes as the premiere example of the often fraught but decisively important relationship between the state and leftist intellectuals. The use of exceptional, famous individuals as exemplars of larger movements and social forces is illuminating, particularly in regards to the enduring influence of Cárdenas, but this approach also has some drawbacks. Zolov leaves readers to wonder how representative luminaries like Cárdenas and Fuentes were of what he describes as a diverse and rapidly changing left. This includes the book’s more general focus on mostly elite men, undoubtedly a reflection of their domination of political parties, diplomatic corps and the Mexican intelligentsia of the time—and therefore also of the bulk of Zolov’s archival sources, a challenge with which many historians are all too familiar. Some important and powerful women of the era briefly appear (Indira Gandhi, Vilma Espín, Elena Poniatowska), giving us intriguing glimpses of their significance to this history and raising the question: did the rise of the New Left, which Zolov underscores was a critical juncture in Mexico, include greater participation of women in the political movements in question? Similarly, how did the role of non-elite supporters of leftist causes and organizations change? Did changes in the demographics of the Mexican left in these years reflect ideological shifts? These issues are not the focus of this book, but suggest fruitful avenues for future, related research.

The presidentialism of Mexico’s political system is well known, but Zolov gives us new insight into how decisively important a particular president’s goals, outlook, and personal disposition were to shaping its foreign policy. The role of the ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) in this history remains more mysterious, including the wrangling between its disparate factions that presumably contributed to the otherwise confounding choice by the charismatic and internationalist López Mateos of the dour and isolationist Gustavo Díaz Ordaz to succeed him in the presidency in 1964. Zolov counts on some previous knowledge by his readers to understand both the PRI’s nature and the role it played, including that Cárdenas was one of its godfathers, undoubtedly an important factor in his choice to ultimately support Díaz Ordaz’s succession.

Packed with detail and deftly weaving together numerous historical narratives, this book is a substantial intellectual achievement. It is also highly readable, clearly argued and rich with interesting vignettes. Full of numerous insights and revelations as well as new data of interest to

scholars in a number of fields, it will also a useful and accessible text for teaching, particularly given its thematic chapters.

Sarah Osten, University of Vermont