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Railroad Radicals in Cold War Mexico

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Railroad Radicals in Cold War Mexico

GENDER, CLASS, AND MEMORY

ROBERT F. ALEGRE

Foreword by

ELENA PONIATOWSKA

University of Nebraska Press
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Set in Dante by Laura Wellington.

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Para mi madre, Angelica Alegre, mi chascona, Caroline Cooper
Torres, y mi chicoca, Penelope Cooper Alegre

Scatter your tears, they're good for the crops.

—Denis Johnson, *Tree of Smoke*

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Foreword

Elena Poniatowska

Translated by Robert F. Alegre

A locomotive at full speed arrives at the station, giving rise to a spectacle that will forever mark the life of a child. As a child Robert Alegre witnessed the train cross the wide lonely plains of Chile and followed its endless trajectory until he reached the station. Perhaps it is in his childhood that we can locate his passion for the subject of the book you are about to read: *Railroad Radicals in Cold War Mexico: Gender, Class, and Memory*. The railroad movement in Mexico has been the subject of many books, but none as passionately written or meticulously documented as this one. His passion is evident in his concern for every one of the *ferrocarrileros* he interviewed. He expresses empathy for them not just as informants but also as individuals, members of a network the country has buried. In writing about them, Alegre exhumes Mexico's railway men.

When Robert Alegre arrived at my home one afternoon, I never imagined he would commit himself so fully to the Mexican rieleiros—and not just to them but also to the women who worked in the system and fought beside their men. The years 1958 and 1959 are fundamental to the history of Mexican workers because Demetrio Vallejo Martínez, the protagonist of Alegre's excellent book, inspired exploited workers in other industries to engage in civil disobedience, paralyzing industries across the entire country.

The railroad union was the bravest of the labor guilds, the most audacious, and the most intelligent. The men were distinguished by their machismo. "*Nobody beats me.*" To be a rielero was to be a win-

ner, to be triumphant. All the battles in Mexico in 1910 were won on the trains. Pancho Villa considered them his enemy, which is why he dynamited them, their metal blown to pieces above combatants and soldaderas.

Robert Alegre arrived as a young researcher from the United States. Charming, he smiled. His questions regarding the oaxaqueño leader Demetrio Vallejo were profound. I had no way of knowing that he would become the first-rate intellectual he has become, nor could I know that he would exhaustively research archives and books for all that has been written about the railroads. It was a pleasure to watch him interview workers and union members for hours, joining their cause. Never had these men had such a receptive audience, a person who stood in such solidarity, as they had in the author. In addition to Mexico City, he lived in Puebla, where the Railroad Museum holds the main archive of Mexican railway life and of the movement of 1958.

Robert Alegre visited men and women in their homes, capturing the words of old rail men with praiseworthy accuracy. He traveled to Oaxaca to interview the most committed activists. I did not know that he would be such an obsessive researcher, one who would not stop until he had recovered a reality so important to Mexico: the reality lived by the *ferrocarrileros*.

We Mexicans believed that the *sexenio* of President Adolfo López Mateos (1958–64) would bring a return to the ideals of our great president Lázaro Cárdenas, that workers and *campesinos* would come to gain respect along with a dignified salary. We Mexicans believed that López Mateos, a man of the Left, admirer of Vasconcelos, would favor the working class. Instead he jailed Demetrio Vallejo and Valentín Campa, the leaders of the movement, and they remained imprisoned for over eleven years. Postrevolutionary Mexico decided to persecute its great social movements, forgetting what had caused Madero, Villa, and Zapata to take up arms, forgetting what they owed to the millions of Mexicans who died in combat during the fraternal war that began in 1910.

Before the revolution, Mexico was already a country covered with tracks, and it was the railroad that brought Mexicans together and

brought progress to the provinces. It was a source of pride to be a railroad man. The woman who married one thought she would be treated like a queen. Railroad families were fundamental to the life of the country. The station chief ruled over an entire world, able to communicate via the telegraph to every corner of the earth, to every town in the country, no matter how isolated.

The Mexican Revolution took place on trains, and the locomotive is its grand protagonist. Losing the rails as a form of transportation is one of the great tragedies that occurred in our country. The railroad movement was a starting point in the democratic life of Mexico, breaking with the revolutionary government's vision of modernism and modernity. It instructed us to end our aping of the culture of the United States.

Mexico's powerful men forgot that to govern is to usher in change; they never managed to transform the public ethic, the basis of democratic values. Instead they perpetuated inequality and violence against the poorest Mexicans. And they went further still — perpetuating violence against women.

We should be grateful to Robert Alegre for accounting for women in his book, especially for focusing on railroad women, who had been overlooked by virtually everyone before this study.

The *ferrocarrileros* were nationalistic. They had fought in the revolution and driven the locomotives that pulled boxcars hauling horses and men and women ready to throw themselves into battle. Casasola's photographs show us soldiers and soldaderas on freight car rooftops. These photos remind us of the tragedy of having lost the iron horse as a form of transportation. It's been a great loss to the progress of the country, because it gave our country the infrastructure necessary for the most important advances: communication systems and, for that matter, education.

Railroad Radicals in Cold War Mexico: Gender, Class, and Memory will be greatly stimulating for any reader. I find the book exciting and, what's more, it *moves* me. Thanks to Alegre I travel thousands of kilometers over rails that link factories to markets, far and wide, throughout my great country. I travel from Sonora to Yucatán, from henequen

plantations to northern mines, and witness how pueblos arise along the tracks and how women approach a window where Robert Alegre sits writing and writing. The women reach to him through the open window, their trays carrying covered apples, sweet bread, and warm corn.

If the train is an iron horse, Alegre is the writer who has demonstrated he can tame the metal machine, who can enter any station in the world and sit along the tracks. Beside his locomotive, all who have passed have raised their eyes and said: "Look, there goes the train. The conductor is an expert. He knows his subject from top to bottom, as do all great historians. The name of the driver is Robert Alegre."

Acknowledgments

I arrived in Mexico in July 1999 at the age of twenty-four with no experience in the country and little knowledge of its history. My aim was to gather enough material to write a thesis on a railroad strike that occurred in the 1950s. That master's thesis, completed at the University of Arizona, turned into a doctoral thesis at Rutgers University, which forms the basis of this book. I would like to take this opportunity to thank the many people who have helped me over the years.

I would like to begin by extending my deepest gratitude to family and friends. My brother, Sergio Alegre, and my sister-in-law, Deana Alegre, were always there for me, whether it was by offering me a place to stay or by giving me a place to leave my books. I am enormously grateful for all that they have done for me. My father, Roberto Alegre, kept encouraging me to write like Ken Follett so that I could make big bucks off of this project. I am unlikely to turn this book into a major motion picture, but I nevertheless appreciate his faith in me. His love of books has been his greatest gift to me. My large extended family in New Jersey, Chile, Belfast, and Portland, Maine, provided all the love and warmth I needed. My mother-in-law, Vicki Tarbell, has provided me with a great deal of love, support, and encouragement over the years. When a Greyhound rolled out of Belfast with a case containing my oral histories, it was Vicki who sped down the highway to track it down. It has been wonderful to get to know Tom and Megan Abercrombie and to watch Maggie and Gridley grow up.

I want to acknowledge all of the support that my close friends in

Jersey provided over many years. Chris Antonini, Michael A. Cintron, Giancarlo Guardacione, David Pomponio, and Chris Romano have provided countless rides, iced coffees, Diet Cokes, and other random gifts to help me get by as a broke student.

This book is dedicated to two women, my mother, Angelica Alegre, and my partner, Caroline Cooper Torres, as well as one future “big mujer,” Penelope Cooper Alegre. My mother realized early on that a life of reading and writing would bring me the most pleasure and fulfillment, and she encouraged me when others wondered why I would choose to live in relative poverty and spend my weekends in the library instead of downtown. Caroline has made the last ten years blissful, and she continues to challenge me intellectually and politically. I look forward to a lifetime together. Finally, I wake up every day eager to find out what Penelope will say and do. I love you, chicoca.

None of my writing on the subject could have been completed without the help of rieleros and rieleras, the men and women who worked for the railroad company and continue to live in railroad neighborhoods. Before I ever visited an archive in Mexico, I took a walk in the railroad neighborhood of Colonia Guerrero in Mexico City. It was there that I first met the late Juan Colín, a rielero who was still involved in political activism despite his advanced age and poor health. Later, in Puebla, I would meet two more politically engaged rieleros, José Jorge Ramírez and Antonio Monero. These men provided me with a wealth of information and introduced me to retired rieleros to interview. Later I would meet a group of fiery rieleras in Oaxaca. I thank them all for telling me their stories.

I first visited the Centro de Documentación e Investigación Ferroviarias, the principal railroad archive in Puebla, in 1999. Over the years, I developed a close working relationship with its knowledgeable staff. Isabel Bonilla Galindo, Patricio Juárez Lucas, Covadonga Vélez Rocha, and José Antonio Ruiz Jarquín went out of their way to suggest materials. More important, they taught me basic facts about the daily operations of the industry. Our discussions were invaluable. Three scholars at the Benemérita Autónoma de Puebla also offered assistance. Gloria Tirado made her personal archive available to me and assured me of

the importance of the topic when I was first starting out. When I returned to Puebla in 2003, David LaFrance introduced me to Roberto Vélez Pliego, the director of the Institute for Social Sciences and Humanities, who granted me the status of visiting researcher. John Mraz gave me a private viewing of his railroad photographs from the 1950s and provided me with a copy of his documentary on rieleros. I thank them for their generosity.

During my 2003–2004 research year in Mexico, I made a few wonderful friends. Elena Poniatowska, the prominent novelist, invited me to her house when I called her out of the blue to find out if she had conducted interviews with Demetrio Vallejo. When I told her that I was working on a history of the railroad movement, she invited me over to talk. Coincidentally, she was working on a novel on the railroad strikes and wanted me to have a look at the manuscript. Over the years, we have had long conversations about everything from politics and history to fatherhood and family life. I could not thank her enough for granting me copies of the interviews she conducted in the 1970s with Demetrio Vallejo and his niece Lilia Benitez. They have been invaluable sources. In Puebla, Manuel Sánchez Porton, a local journalist and raconteur, gave my partner and me a place to stay for a month. His embellished and longwinded stories of his university years in the 1960s were highly entertaining. Nassira Gamo, a mutual friend, encouraged us to rock and roll.

I ended my research trip in Mexico City where I had the pleasure of meeting Gladys McCormick, Stephanie Ballenger, and Hal Jones. Our conversations on contemporary politics, history, and theory were enjoyable and edifying. I want to thank Gladys for putting up with my questions, for which she always seems to have an informed answer. I would also like to thank Hal for inviting me to give a talk on my project at the David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies at Harvard.

Much of what works in this book is a result of exchanges and advice I've had with professors and fellow graduate students at the University of Arizona and Rutgers University. At Arizona, Bert Barickman broke me into the rigors of the profession through his high standards;

I came to admire his devotion to teaching. Kevin Gosner offered sage advice and direction, while Donna Guy suggested that I incorporate an analysis of gender into my project. And Joel Stillerman helped me think about the social theory that undergirds Latin American labor historiography. At moments when I was not reading and writing, I enjoyed learning about Brazil from Joanne Tucker and Jeremy Willette and talking politics and poetry with Brendon Bush.

I would like to express my deep gratitude to Bill Beezley, who first encouraged me in 1999 to write about the railway movement. I entered his seminar planning to write a paper about the Chilean student movement of the 1960s. At the end of the semester, I was fully committed to this project. Even after I left Arizona to go to my home state, Professor Beezley continued to offer advice, write letters in support of applications, and encourage me to finish. It is a great pleasure to have this work included in the Mexican Experience series, which he edits.

Most of my graduate study took place at Rutgers University, where I came to work with a remarkable group of professors specializing in a number of fields. No one did more for me than Mark Wasserman, my dissertation director. His astute comments, attention to detail, and insistence on clarity improved every page of my dissertation. I also came to admire his ability to balance work and family. I look forward to reading his new work.

Professors at Rutgers provided me with models of politically engaged teaching and scholarship. Temma Kaplan came to Rutgers during my second year in the program and has been a steady source of advice and wisdom ever since. I could not thank her enough for all the time she spent discussing this project and for insisting that I write clearly and passionately. Her own work is a source of inspiration. A colloquium on representation with Joan W. Scott changed the way I thought about history and politics. That course led me to minor in theory, for which I spent a summer reading about poststructuralism with the assistance of Scott. I thank her for taking time out of her busy summer to mentor me and for offering advice on applying for grants. I also came to profit considerably from Jim Livingston's creative readings of Hegel and Marx, and as my minor field co-examiner, he too took time out of his

summer to guide my study in social theory. Nancy Hewitt, whose own work on women's history and labor history I greatly admire, provided insightful comments on my dissertation. Finally, I'd like to thank Ginny Yans for her smart advice and sustained encouragement.

A small group of graduate comrades made New Brunswick more enjoyable. My intellectual growth was tied to countless conversations with a core group of Latin Americanists, which included Kristen Block, Andrea Campetella, Sandra Mendiola, and Greg Swedberg. Daniel Wherley became a good friend whom I could always count on for witty commentary. Jonathon Wharton hooked me up with a job teaching at Steven Institute of Technology. I thank them each for their friendship and support during those years and look forward to reading their work in the future.

Two groups outside of Rutgers helped me think through issues of writing and historiography. I want to thank the cohort of the 2000 Oaxaca Summer Institute on Mexican History, especially Eileen Ford, Michael Matthews, Andrew Paxman, Ageeth Sluis, and Eddie Wright-Rios. Bill French and Ann Blum provided insight throughout the month. I would especially like to thank Andrew Paxman for his critique of the introduction. I am very much looking forward to his biography of William Jenkins.

The committed group of historians associated with the Conference on the History of Women and Gender in Mexico has provided a wonderful environment to share my work. I always have a blast at the conference, which is in large part due to the people who attend. Mary Kay Vaughn and Heather Fowler-Salamini have provided a great deal of encouragement throughout the years. And I have profited from conversations with María Teresa Fernández-Aceves, Elaine Carey, Susie Porter, and Francie Chassen-López, among many others. I would especially like to thank Susie Porter for her critique of chapter 2.

In addition to these colleagues, I would like to thank the readers who reviewed this manuscript, Susan Gauss and Monica Rankin read the manuscript twice. Each gave extensive and extremely valuable critiques. Their own work is essential for understanding postwar Mexico. Also thanks to the staff at the University of Nebraska Press, including

former editor Heather Lundine, Bridget Barry, Ann Baker, and copy-editor Elaine Otto. Barry Carr and Eric Zolov gave helpful advice during the latter stages of my writing.

In 2009, I moved to Portland, Maine, and joined the faculty of the University of New England, where I have found support from a wonderful group of colleagues. I would especially like to thank Paul Burlin, Steve Byrd, Elizabeth De Wolfe, Brian Duff, Julia Garrett, Jean Murachanian, Jennifer Tuttle, and Eric Zuelow for sharing their ideas on teaching, writing, and publishing. I am also grateful to the Seeds working group, particularly Ali Ahmida, Jenny Denbow, Brian Duff, Susan McHugh, Alicia Peters, Michelle Steen-Adams, and Eric Zuelow, for providing comments on the introduction. Elaine Brouillette, our administrative assistant, makes everything run smoothly. She does an amazing job. And I would like to thank David Carey Jr. at the University of Southern Maine for his friendship and for all of his advice over the past few years.

My education and research have been funded by a number of institutions. A University of Arizona Graduate College Minority Fellowship, along with two years of tuition remission, enabled me to complete my master's degree. Two Rutgers University Excellence fellowships provided a stipend and tuition remission that allowed me to concentrate fully on my doctoral studies. A Tinker Foundation fellowship financed my first trip to Mexico in 1999, which led to a Fulbright-Hays fellowship that financed a year of research in Mexico. A Hewlett Foundation fellowship provided funding for a month in Oaxaca. The University of New England provided monies to acquire the photographs. I want to thank Diana Montano for locating and attaining the images.

The most important institutional support came before I entered college. In 1993, I was accepted to Stockton State College through the Educational Opportunity Funding program. EOF, which is underfunded and often criticized, helps students from poor families, and often with a poor academic record, enter and graduate college. I had barely graduated high school, but the officers at EOF gave me the chance to go to college. I will be forever grateful to Tony Bethel, Stephen Davis, and Barbara Tilelli for the opportunity.

Abbreviations

BUO: Bloque Unidad Obrera

CEDIF: Centro de Documentación e Investigación Ferroviarias

CIA: Central Intelligence Agency

CTM: Confederación de Trabajadores de México

CUT: Central Única de Trabajadores

CROM: Confederación Regional Obrera Mexicana

DFS: Dirección Federal de Seguridad

FNM: Ferrocarriles Nacionales de México

IMF: International Monetary Fund

PCM: Partido Comunista Mexicano

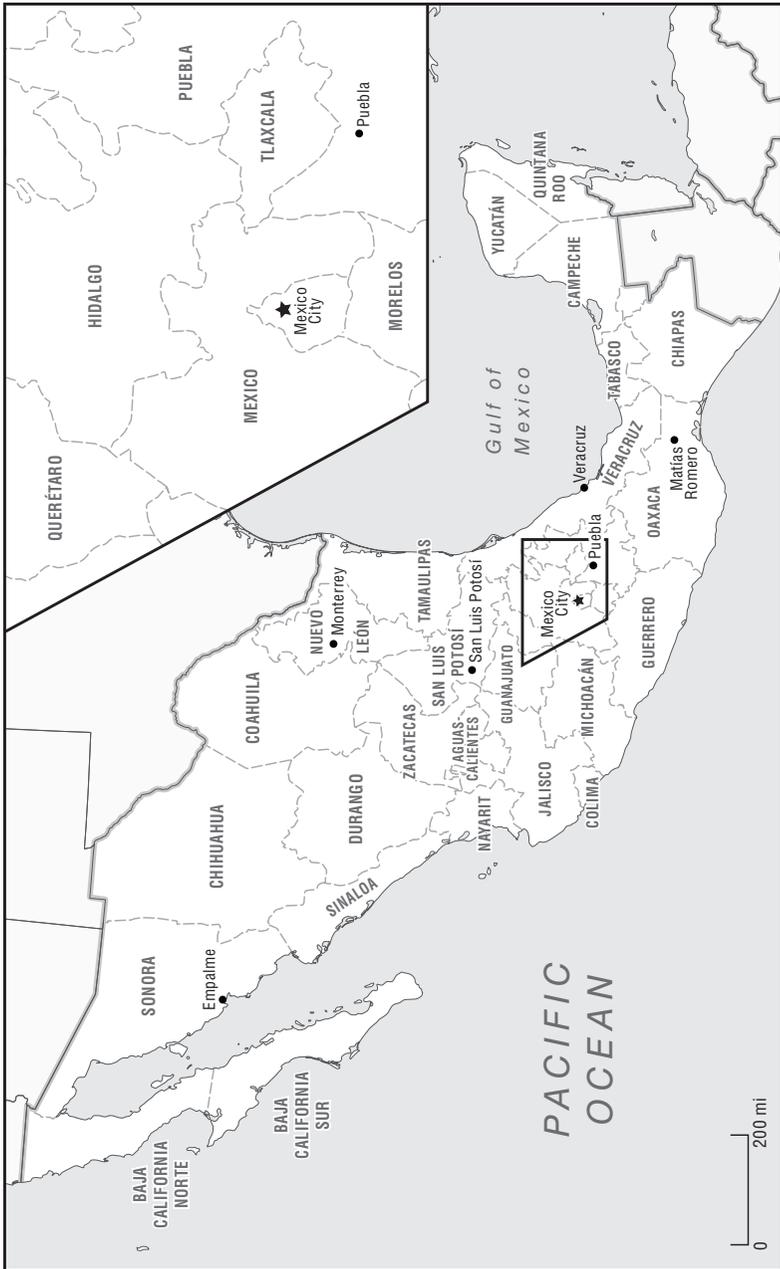
POCM: Partido Obrero Campesino Mexicano

PP: Partido Popular

PRI: Partido Revolucionario Institucional

STFRM: Sindicato de Trabajadores Ferrocarrileros de México

UMM: Unión de Mecánicos Mexicanos



1. Mexico

Railroad Radicals in Cold War Mexico

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Introduction

The Working Class in Cold War Mexico

Geraldo dreams of steam-powered locomotives like those on which he toiled decades ago. He misses their roar and whistle. Retired now for over twenty years, Geraldo awakes from this recurring dream with nostalgia for a life he once lived. The steam engines are long gone, but for this moment he feels the rush of elation he had as a child accompanying his father to the rail yard. It is the same thrill he would later experience when he took a job himself at the yard. At nights he welcomes those old locomotives. “Good God, the steam engines are back. I pictured them as if it were yesterday,” he explains. “I dreamed of the steam engine I worked on.”¹

If paternal influence and the lure of locomotives drew men like Geraldo Niño Mendes to railroad work, working-class women held no illusions that they would one day cross the country atop a rolling locomotive. The railroad workers’ union, the Sindicato de Trabajadores Ferrocarrileros de Mexico (STFRM), and the company, the Ferrocarriles Nacionales de México (FNM), prohibited women from working in yards or on trains.² With few opportunities to strike out on their own, many women opted for the path chosen by Ruth Ramírez, who, following in her mother’s footsteps, married a railway man, or *rielero*.³ When Ramírez married José Jorge Ramírez in the 1940s, rieleros could count on an independent union to fight for regular wage increases. But within a few years, national economic priorities and political machinations would result in a co-opted union, frozen wages, and economic hardship for railway families. Opening her arms to indicate her disappoint-

ment with her shabby dwelling, Ramírez laments, “When I married a *ferrocarrilero*, I expected something more. You expect something more than this. But no, nothing.”³⁴ This book is about *rieleros* and *rieleras* like Geraldo Niño Mendes and Ruth Ramírez, whose lives the railway industry permeated. The story of their struggle to make a better life captures a pivotal moment in post–World War II Mexican history.

After World War II, Mexico entered an era of unprecedented economic growth and seeming prosperity.⁵ The political system was stable, with the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) firmly entrenched in power. After the tumultuous years of President Lázaro Cárdenas (1934–40), when land reforms redistributed nearly 50 million acres of land to hundreds of thousands of landless peasants, labor unions won better wages and working conditions, and the government stood up to foreign oil companies, expropriating them in 1938. The ruling party had shifted rightward, committed to less radical economic development policies. Presidents Manuel Ávila Camacho (1940–46), Miguel Alemán Valdés (1946–52), and Adolfo Ruiz Cortines (1952–58) sought to modernize Mexico through state-led industrialization, but they did so by reining in labor, even arresting the most outspoken activists.

Underneath the surface glow of prosperity and modernity there lay growing discontent among workers who felt that Mexico’s progress had come at their expense. Working-class families, in particular, felt the impact of inflation, which eroded the hard-won gains of the 1930s, facilitated by widespread union corruption. From 1948 to 1958, PRI-appointed STFRM officials, disparagingly known as *charros*, collaborated with PRI and railroad officials to freeze wages for the rank and file. In doing so, they helped keep freight rates on cargo low and thereby assisted strategic industries that were critical for industrialization, such as mining. Along with PRI officials, STFRM *charros* instructed the rank and file to accept low wages for the good of the country’s economy. In exchange for their compliance, the PRI backed these officials despite allegations that union elections were rife with fraud; in addition to receiving better pay, *charros* promoted their friends to management positions and rubbed shoulders with FNM and PRI officials at social gatherings.

In 1958 and 1959 discontent erupted when members of the STFRM staged a series of strikes that constituted the most threatening grassroots working-class movement and the largest labor strikes since those during the revolution of 1910. Railroad workers went on strike three times during those two years, demanding not only higher wages but also the transformation of their union into a workers' democracy, which required the end of the collaborationist union politics that had helped solidify postwar PRI rule. After relatively conciliatory negotiations during the first two strikes that resulted in considerable concessions for railroad workers employed by the government-operated FNM, President Adolfo López Mateos (1958–64), unwilling to negotiate better terms for workers employed by private railroad firms, crushed the third strike by calling in the military on March 26, 1959. However strictly strikers couched their demands on the progressive Constitution of 1917, they found that—in the context of the Cold War—exercising their constitutional right to organize and strike appeared radical, even subversive.

Railroad Radicals joins recent historical studies in revising postrevolutionary political history by interpreting grassroots mobilizations as contingent contests between citizens and national politicians.⁶ The outcome of the railroad movement was not predetermined by the structure of state-labor relations but was the consequence of individual and collective decisions. Writing on the women's movement in the 1930s, historian Jocelyn Olcott warns us against holding an a priori assumption that corporatist politics resulted in the defeat of grassroots movements: "A narrative focusing too explicitly on the end . . . would ignore the small and large victories and their legacy for women's organizing."⁷ A number of recent studies have shown how subaltern actors resisted the centralizing state, but this historiographic trend has until now sidestepped the role that the working class played in contesting PRI rule and has not yet told the story of labor's "small and large" postwar victories. While it is true that the national government eventually suppressed the railway movement by sending police and military officers to arrest striking workers, railway families won tangible benefits. Political scientists who have written about the railway strikes

have focused “on the end,” using the repression as evidence of the supposedly inevitable failures that workers have endured with the PRI in power.⁸ This study peeks into that contingent period when workers still stood a chance at victory.

I argue that the railroad movement reflected the contested process of postwar modernization, which began with workers demanding higher wages at the end of World War II, led to the imposition of government cronies as heads of the STFRM in 1948, and eventually culminated in the strikes of 1958 and 1959. The struggle signaled railroad men and women’s desire for meaningful political inclusion in the planning of the postwar political economy, which in practical terms included the capability of democratically elected union officials to lobby the national government on behalf of the rank and file. This desire equally motivated thousands of working-class men and women in other industries to mobilize and strike during this same period. In laying bare dissidents’ ambitious political objectives, *Railroad Radicals* contests studies that depict the movement as motivated primarily by economic concerns.⁹

I understand the railway strikes as a national effort to democratize union and national politics, propelling a movement that incorporated workers from the most powerful industrial unions. It is my contention that the fight for democratic unionism threatened to deliver a direct blow to the PRI’s postwar economic agenda by opening the way for the rank and file to demand through the STFRM a redistribution of economic resources. After winning a wage increase in July 1958, railway workers fought to democratize their union, to wrest it away from charros in cahoots with the FNM and PRI. Democratic unionism, they believed, was a right enshrined in Article 123 in the Constitution. The desire for democratic unionism spread among the strongest unions in 1958, as teachers, along with petroleum, telegraph, and electrical workers, sought to depose charros running their respective unions. *Railroad Radicals* captures how these men and women sought to reestablish the power of the working class in postrevolutionary Mexico. In doing so, it enlarges our understanding of Mexican labor history, making clear that gains won by labor during the revolution continued to shape state-labor relations in the postwar era.¹⁰

During the course of the movement, dissident men and women politicized informal relationships at work and in neighborhoods. Friends, acquaintances, and neighbors became political comrades, mobilizing around class and gender identities based on individuals' relationship to the industry. On streets and worksites, railway men and women created a repertoire of habits, behaviors, and acts that they came to associate with being a proper rielero or rielera. In 1958 and 1959 they drew on these identities, as well as the affective ties made by years of living together, to create a cohesive movement.

Railroad community culture cannot be fully understood without assessing the profound importance that gender identity played in everyday life and during political struggles. Rieleros developed a form of heightened masculinity specific to railway work, as they came to associate their manliness with the mastering of a mobile industrial experience critical to national development and international capitalism. By striking for higher wages and union autonomy they displayed the strength and courage key to their individual and collective masculine identity. Railway women like Ramírez did not reject railway patriarchy but rather made use of it, appropriating masculine codes to pressure rieleros to do right by their families and join the movement.

This study gives rieleras a narrative place in the history of the railroad industry by analyzing the role that gender played at workplaces and in neighborhoods and by chronicling how they participated in the movement. In doing so, it underscores the importance of looking beyond electoral politics to understand how working-class women engaged the public political sphere. *Railroad Radicals* writes rieleras into the history of postwar resistance to PRI hegemony, while detailing how a patriarchal order centered on the industry placed limits on their everyday social and political expression. Ruth Ramírez and thousands of other rieleras participated in the railway movement, but they did so within social regulations set by a patriarchal culture specific to railway work and to railway communities.

From the onset of my research, I faced institutional and social obstacles to learning about rieleras. First, archival records, reflecting the gendered character of railroad work, focus almost exclusively on men.

FNM records are useful for understanding how the company sought to create respectable spaces for rieleras and rieleros, such as sporting events and dances, but they tell us little about how women experienced these events. Obtaining interviews with women also proved daunting. I found that elderly rieleras in Puebla and Mexico City would not speak to me without their husbands' approval, but husbands often explained that their wives knew nothing of union politics and were therefore not worth interviewing. In most cases, they refused to grant me an interview with their wives. Those men who allowed interviews usually insisted on remaining in the room. Such was the case with my interview with Ruth Ramírez. Fortunately, in the summer of 2004 I learned through a source that a community of widowed rieleras remains active in Matías Romero, Oaxaca, so I took an overnight bus to the former railroad town. In Matías Romero, I recorded the stories of elderly rieleras who continue to view themselves as *vallejistas*—supporters of Demetrio Vallejo, the unlikely leader of the railway movement of the late 1950s.

The failure to document rielera postwar activism is in part a consequence of historians' depiction of women as a conservative force in Mexican political history. As John D. French explains, "Female activism in Mexico was . . . likely to be identified with piety, anti-bolshevism . . . and the defense of traditional gender roles."¹¹ This caricature helped explain why women did not gain suffrage rights until 1953. In 1994, a collection of essays edited by historians Heather Fowler-Salamini and Mary Kay Vaughn presented a much more complex portrayal of rural women's political participation. Fowler-Salamini and Vaughn encouraged us to investigate how "During the revolution and its aftermath, [social and ideological processes] widened women's spaces [and] subtly altered the patriarchal norms governing women's behavior," a task assumed by Olcott in *Revolutionary Women in Postrevolutionary Mexico*.¹²

Through a study of women's activism at the local, regional, and national levels, Olcott expands the sphere of women's political participation in the early twentieth century, debunking the caricature of Mexican women as reflexively conservative. Olcott looks beyond the narrow

issue of suffrage, for women “inhabited citizenship less as a collection of specific laws than as a set of social, cultural, and political practices.” Women activists “recod[ed] the cultural meanings of women’s labor and community involvement, reframing them as . . . public, civic duties that demonstrated their political capabilities.”¹³ Rieleras practiced revolutionary citizenship in precisely this manner. When they took to the streets, they inhabited a public, political persona in defense of a civic good, the railway family.

The importance of family to railway communities can be found in company documents. The FNM kept dossiers on every rank-and-file employee from the day they submitted an application to, in most cases, the day they died. The basic application form listed the employee’s place of residence, household size, age, and level of education as well as their height and weight. Drawing on this information, we know that the typical railway household included nuclear and extended families. Often a father and a son worked for the FNM and were responsible for providing for mothers, grandparents, brothers, sisters, and even aunts. These webs of dependency became politicized during the strikes, with extended family members joining the struggle. Therefore, in assessing the strength and impact of the movement, we must take into account that for every man or woman on strike, there were nuclear and extended family members who stood to gain or lose depending on the outcome. Since many of these individuals joined demonstrations, hosted clandestine meetings, or in other ways aided the movement, we can be sure that *familias ferrocarrileras* strengthened at the neighborhood level the commitment of STFRM members.

Moreover, I maintain that a dichotomizing Cold War idiom created the conditions for the repression of the movement. I conceptualize this idiom as a dialectical movement joining ideas and actions. It combined a logic that pitted communists against Mexicans and labor against capital (and vice versa) with a set of practices that both shaped and enacted this logic. Acts and ideas, words and deeds, informed one another. This Cold War idiom circulated as rhetoric in newspapers, magazines, and government speeches, as well as in conversations on streets and in homes. Protests, arrests, and physical confrontations emerged as the

material manifestation of ideological divisions. Discourse provided analytical frames for igniting—and perceiving—material acts, such as strikes and arrests, while these actions provided content for newspaper articles and editorials, as well as official speeches, to name a few communicative acts. Both workers and their detractors engaged in physical and discursive exchanges. Both took to the streets, and both used written and oral communication to spread their message to the broader public.

Finally, this study presents the Mexican reception of the global Cold War, showing in particular how it shaped state-labor relations. In contrast to diplomatic studies on the Cold War, this is a street-level story whose protagonists were both national politicians and everyday men and women whose names have been lost to history. The Cold War idiom that they fashioned shaped everyday political discourse, becoming part of the public common sense. Drawing on anticommunist rhetoric that predated World War II, the PRI and other critics casted all detractors of government policy as agents of subversion, intent on overthrowing the state and eradicating capitalism in favor of Soviet-style communism. In practice, red-baiting facilitated the implementation of postwar pro-business industrialization policies, for all opponents could be reduced to communists and hence enemies of the state. The government, the FNM, and the press justified the arresting of men like Geraldo Niño Mendes by accusing them of working in cahoots with Marxist operatives to overthrow the government.

The War on Labor

The PRI's postwar economic policies, which halted or even rescinded labor gains, was all the more surprising to the working class because they had come to view themselves as victors of the revolution of 1910. Scholars have rightly viewed the revolution as largely a peasant struggle for land, but industrial workers joined military ranks and mobilized for workplace reforms with no less zeal than their peasant counterparts.¹⁴ The Constitution of 1917 bore the imprint of labor's direct action, leading to "the most complete and progressive labor laws in the Western Hemisphere."¹⁵ Labor's gains were introduced in Article

123, which when codified in 1931 legalized the right to organize and strike. Dissidents in 1958 and 1959 grounded the legality of their strikes on precisely this constitutional guarantee. After their arrest in 1959, strikers invoked Article 123 to build their defense in court.

The revolution led to a heightened sense of nationalism among railway families.¹⁶ Railroad workers had fought in the revolution and had driven the locomotives that carried military personnel to battles across the country. Photographs, folklore, and oral traditions placed railway workers at the center of revolutionary struggle. The struggle bore fruit in 1933, when workers formed the STFRM. The union strove to attain for workers benefits implicitly promised by the revolution, notably regular wage hikes and a greater measure of workplace control. In the process, the STFRM became a linchpin for the modern Mexican state.

Scholars agree that by supporting Cárdenas, the STFRM helped the Partido de la Revolución Mexicana (established in 1938 and changed to the PRI in 1946) solidify its dominance over national politics.¹⁷ When he came to power in 1934, Cárdenas formed a mutually beneficial alliance with the STFRM and other national unions. Cárdenas and STFRM leaders shared the conviction that the government was responsible for generating economic growth and modernization through public investment in industry. To be sure, his commitment to the Mexicanization of the economy became legendary when he completed the expropriation process of the FNM in June 1937.¹⁸

Cárdenas's populism did not come without a cost to labor, however. In 1938 he turned the administration of the railroads over to the STFRM, creating the Workers' Administration. While the move empowered the union, it also placed the responsibility of disciplining workers on union leaders; furthermore, in exchange for government support, the STFRM and other industrial unions were expected to comply with presidential policies.¹⁹ Cárdenas therefore laid the foundation for state-labor corporatist relations; presidents Ávila Camacho, Aléman, Ruiz Cortines, and López Mateos built on this foundation throughout the 1940s and 1950s, backing labor leaders who supported PRI policies and reined in the rank and file.

The discontent among railway workers that emerged in the late 1950s had its roots in the national government's postwar economic policies. Ávila Camacho took advantage of the patriotic fervor stoked with World War II to create a pact between national labor syndicates and the government, in effect deepening the PRI's close ties to industrial unions that Cárdenas had established. Working-class people and the unions that represented them supported the Allied cause by postponing demands for wage increases, thereby facilitating industrial production and helping to foment national unity. Mexicans of all classes stood united against the fascist threat. The largest unions showed their cooperation when in 1942 they signed the Labor Unity Pact, accepting wage concessions and promising not to strike in order to support the war effort, though scholars have noted that workers continued to strike throughout the 1940s.²⁰

When the war ended, STFRM leaders, who were still independent and beholden to the rank and file, expected the government and railway companies to reward members with higher wages for the sacrifices they had made. The STFRM urged the PRI to increase the wages of the rank and file. In addition, the STFRM advocated for the government to invest in national industrialization. By pressing for more and better jobs for workers, the STFRM sought a larger share of the economic pie for the working class.

Labor's proposals coincided with the election of Miguel Alemán in July 1946. Alemán shared labor's desire for a modern, industrialized Mexico, but his industrialization policies conflicted with those supported by the country's powerful unions. When Alemán drew on an emergent nationalist current that condemned the U.S. government for what appeared to be an imperialistic trade policy, he spoke the same language as militant labor leaders who criticized the United States for insisting that Mexico open its doors to American products. But it soon became clear that Alemán's nationalist leanings were aimed at protecting Mexican industrialists, not working-class men and women.

The Cold War context enabled Alemán to fashion increasingly nationalistic industrial policies. This was especially true once it became clear that the United States would fail to provide the necessary aid

and loans to help foment Mexican industrialization. Mexican officials felt slighted because they thought that the United States would reward Mexico for having assisted them during the war.²¹ Alemán responded to this rebuff by initiating an Import-Substitution Industrialization strategy to promote and protect Mexican industries through tariffs and trade controls. At the same time, Alemán took advantage of the U.S. government's need for Mexico's assistance in hemispheric politics by cleverly positioning himself—and Mexico—as an enemy of communism. In doing so, he was able to implement trade policies that protected Mexican industrialists from their northern neighbors without being labeled a communist. Contesting the United States in this way enabled Alemán to place himself in the revolutionary nationalist tradition.

The Cold War also provided the ideological framework for the PRI's shift toward political conservatism and the decreased importance accorded to workers' rights.²² President Alemán's administration was part of a hemispheric shift away from populist governments that had advanced state-financed industrialization combined with voting and labor rights. These governments reined in parties and movements that sought to expand economic opportunities for the working and middle classes.²³ Instead, governments elaborated policies of industrialization that resulted in reduced wages for the working class. Cold War fears enabled politicians, industrialists, and social commentators to develop a language and logic to ostracize and dismiss critics by labeling them communist.

In March 1947, President Harry Truman articulated what has since become known as the Truman Doctrine. Before a joint session of Congress, the president called on the United States to provide financial assistance to Greece and Turkey in order to prevent the Soviet Union from gaining a foothold in the region. After explaining the urgency of the situation in Greece and Turkey, the president said that the United States had a responsibility “to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures.”²⁴ The speech had ramifications far beyond Greece and Turkey, for it outlined a new approach to dealing with the Soviet Union and the specter

of communism—namely, the United States aimed to contain the influence of the red menace by directly assisting neutral countries. The Truman Doctrine marked a watershed in hemispheric political culture. The anticommunist surge had a profound effect on American labor, as the 1947 Taft-Hartley Act enabled the president to terminate strikes deemed dangerous to the health of the nation, an ominous precursor to the hemispheric push against labor. In Latin America, governments took advantage of the heightening of anticommunist fears to abandon liberal democracy for more authoritarian forms of government.²⁵ As historian Greg Grandin explains, beginning in 1947, Latin American “reform parties lost their dynamism, while governments intervened against work stoppages, passed legislation restricting the right to strike, and outlawed or repressed Communist parties.”²⁶ Clearly, Cold War geopolitics strengthened the hand of conservative forces while weakening progressive movements throughout the hemisphere, as the working classes found themselves increasingly marginalized.

Working-Class Insurgency during the “Mexican Miracle”

The period between 1940 and 1960 has customarily been viewed as one of economic stability and social peace that enabled a “miracle” in economic growth.²⁷ As historian Arthur Schmidt points out, “Between 1940 and 1970, the Mexican economy expanded more than sixfold, and manufacturing output rose by a factor of ten.”²⁸ Compared with other Latin American countries that experienced guerrilla mobilization and even political coups, Mexico between 1940 and 1968 appeared remarkably stable to outside observers or to those deaf to working-class and peasant complaints, as government officials boasted of the country’s “stabilizing development.” It was not until the government’s massacre of student protestors in Mexico City’s Tlatelolco Square before the Olympics of 1968 that middle-class discontent with the PRI broadened, leading to increased militancy, including the rise of guerrilla groups in the countryside.²⁹

Well before 1968, however, many among the working class had become disillusioned with the PRI’s course of economic development and had already experienced government repression, with the mili-

tary arresting strikers and imprisoning family members. Moreover, Alemán's ambitious industrialization programs and policies aimed at capital accumulation masked working-class resentment over drops in real wages and government influence over industrial unions. The rosy portrayal of the country's economy in the press and by politicians did not reflect the hard times faced by workers and their families. Frozen wages on those working in sectors key to national development, such as railway and electrical workers, meant that they now could buy less food and clothing at the market. For them and many other working-class families, the "miracle" appeared to be a mirage.³⁰

Considering how widespread working-class mobilizations were in the 1950s, why have scholars neglected to assess the importance of these movements in contesting the postwar political and economic order? Part of the answer lies in historians' justified focus on the revolution of 1910, the first social revolution in the twentieth century. Up until the late 1990s, an overwhelming number of studies in Mexican history focused on the revolution.³¹ The period after 1940 was left to political scientists, who agreed that corporatist national politics defused grassroots movements.³² According to these studies, local and national politics after the revolution became a game played by elite politicians, business people, and corrupt union leaders. Working-class mobilizations, including the railway movement, were seen as rare and unimportant exceptions in large part because they were so often suppressed by paying off union leaders or by arresting protestors.

Up until now, the scholarly literature on the railway movement has drawn primarily from Mexican newspapers, the writings of labor leaders, and assorted pamphlets and other materials of political parties. Scholars in Puebla have collected oral histories of rank-and-file workers, but they have yet to be integrated into a scholarly account of the strikes in its multifarious dimensions.³³ Secondary works draw heavily from Demetrio Vallejo's *Las luchas ferrocarrileras que conmovieron a México*, a biased but highly informative blow-by-blow account of the strikes. Political scientist Antonio Alonso's *El movimiento ferrocarrilero en México, 1958–59*, published in 1972, remains the best of these works. Alonso sheds light on the role of political parties and labor leaders on

the strikes, but he fails to explore how everyday sociabilities in neighborhoods and workplaces enabled rieleros and rieleras to forge a collective identity that would prove crucial to achieving solidarity during the movement.

Two notable works in political science have drawn on *El movimiento ferrocarrilero en México* to comment on the railway movement's role in contesting the hegemony of the PRI in the late 1950s. Evelyn Stevens's *Protest and Response in Mexico* moved beyond analyses of the "decision making process [within] authoritarian regimes" to focus on the strength of movements that countered the PRI.³⁴ Although she did little more than present a standard narrative of the railway strikes, she took the important step of incorporating Alonso's conclusions into the U.S. political scientist literature, suggesting that scholars should acknowledge the railway movement's role in challenging the post-war political order. Kevin J. Middlebrook has documented in greater detail how the railway movement challenged PRI rule in the late 1950s.³⁵ Unfortunately, Middlebrook concludes that the repression of the movement was inevitable, failing to fully assess the gains that workers won, such as higher wages and free medical care for families. These gains stayed on the books after the repression, serving as reminders that the independent railway movement came through for *familias ferrocarrileras*.

The line of research inaugurated by Alonso and continued by Stevens and Middlebrook overlooked the political clout flexed by rank-and-file railway men and women. Middlebrook's *The Paradox of Revolution: Labor, the State, and Authoritarianism in Mexico* does argue that political scientists should factor into their analyses the political pressure put on the state by "society," but he depicts labor disputes as battles between union leaders, company officials, and national politicians. *Railroad Radicals* offers a corrective to these institutional studies by placing everyday railway men and women at the center of the story and by arguing that their everyday interactions made possible the solidarity necessary to organize a national railway movement.

One of the main goals of my book is to convey the broad character of working-class activism during the 1950s. Indeed, the railway move-

ment did not unfold in a vacuum. It received critical support from other disgruntled and mobilized working-class families fighting their own battles over workplace and community issues. It would not be an exaggeration to state that 1958 and 1959 saw what amounted to a working-class insurgency in Mexico City along with major sustained demonstrations in large and small urban centers, such as Monterrey, Puebla, Guadalajara, Matías Romero, San Luis Potosí, and even the far northern cities of Empalme and Nogales.³⁶ Unions in sectors critical to national economic development—including petrol, electrical, and telegraph workers—fought to oust imposed charro officials while demanding that the PRI put the needs of workers ahead of those of business.³⁷ Labor disturbances were so widespread that in Mexico City even matadors walked off the job.

These protests extended those of the early 1950s, when campesinos and workers in Morelos followed Ruben Jaramillo in fighting for access to land and for greater control of the workplace. During the same period, Miguel Henríquez Guzmán led a faction that split from the PRI over what they considered an abandonment of revolutionary principles. Like mobilized industrial families in 1958, the Jaramillistas and Henríquistas wanted the promises of the revolution fulfilled.³⁸ Hence the railway movement was certainly not the first to oppose the PRI's postwar economic policies. However, while mobilized campesinos, teachers, and industrial workers caused PRI officials varying degrees of inconvenience and displeasure, only railroad workers could shut down the national economy by striking. As a consequence of their strategic place in the national and international capitalist order, the railway movement constituted the most threatening of the working-class and peasant struggles that unfolded in the postwar era.

Memory Entrepreneurs and the Uses of Oral History

Evidence countering institutional studies that portray the working class as impotent can be found today on streets surrounding defunct railway stations throughout the country. When the PRI privatized the FNM in 1996, investors moved to close most of the stations administered by the state, but the people who toiled on the rails continue to

live in what not too long ago were considered to be railway neighborhoods. In Mexico City, elderly rieleros and rieleras congregate in small groups across the street from the Buenavista station in Colonia Guerrero, where government offices distribute biweekly pension checks. They tell jokes, reminisce about the “good old days” before diesel engines made steam ones redundant, complain about the privatization of the industry, and generally enjoy each other’s company. I found similar scenes of gathering railway men and women in Puebla and Matías Romero, two cities that housed major repair yards and stations. I met on porches and in backyards with rieleras in Matías Romero and in community halls and living rooms in Puebla. It is on those streets and in those houses that I came to know many of the men and women whose stories inform and enliven my analysis.

I use oral histories to give a rich portrait of how these grassroots railway men and women participated in the struggle. My study joins those by scholars of working-class communities who have found oral history to be an indispensable methodology, because the voices of workers and their families are often muffled or altogether absent in institutional sources. Oral history has given us access to working-class cultures in Argentina, Chile, Colombia, and Guatemala, among other places, but this methodology has yet to be rigorously applied to the study of the Mexican working class or of Mexico in general.³⁹ I use oral histories to provide a view into the intimate, everyday lives of railway men and women, teasing out the intricate habits, routines, and self-perception of people at work and in neighborhoods. In addition, I question the process of memory itself, delving into the meanings of conflicting remembrances. Most notably, interviews have enabled me to write the first study to incorporate rieleras into the history of the industry. The story of their participation is well known in railway neighborhoods, but neither academic nor popular historians have ever told it.

Feminist scholars have found oral history particularly fruitful for subverting or complementing traditional narratives that elide the role of women.⁴⁰ With tape recorder and notebook in hand, they have inscribed the stories of a wide range of Latin American women, from Argentine meatpacking workers to Colombian Catholic textile workers,

into the broader narrative of twentieth-century Latin American history. In analyzing the role of rieleras in the railway movement, I hope to add to our knowledge of women's activism in Mexico and in Latin America more generally. Without oral histories, their story could not be told.

I recognize that the interview is a political act. The oral historian invites the interviewee to shape the history of a community, an industry, and even a country. If the histories of communities, institutions, and nations are products of political debates and struggles, then the interviewee becomes a voice in a discursive contest over how to understand and narrate the past. Since rieleras and rieleros were part of a highly politicized community, it should come as no surprise that I found interviewees to be quite aware that they were participating in a historical debate with implications for understanding the present, such as corruption within the present-day PRI or the impoverishment of many railway families. Indeed, in many cases these men and women expressed their desire for the public to know about the courageous struggles they organized against the PRI as well as the hardships they still endure.

The most politicized of these informants are what sociologist Elizabeth Jelin has called a “memory entrepreneur,” a social agent “who seek[s] social recognition and political legitimacy of *one* (their own) interpretation or narrative of the past” (italics in the original).⁴¹ Demetrio Vallejo and his niece, Lilia Benitez Vallejo, are two such memory entrepreneurs interviewed by the prominent journalist and novelist Elena Poniatowska in 1972. Poniatowska visited Vallejo regularly during his eleven-year imprisonment in Lecumberri Prison as a result of spearheading the railway strikes, and she became well acquainted with his activist niece. These transcripts—each over two hundred pages long—provide a window into the making of railway activists and reveal insider information of what was said and done by dissident leaders during the movement. As with all of the interviews used in this study, those of Vallejo and Benitez teach us about how people lived “offstage,” places obscured by official documents, as well as the meanings that people attributed to everyday past experiences. But they do

so with a political goal in mind: exposing FNM and PRI officials as stale, corrupt, and illegitimate.

There is no easy way to reconcile the interviewee's undisclosed narrative goals with the interviewer's objective of attaining an evidentiary base. My approach has been to treat each interview as a text with multiple layers of meaning.⁴² Specifically I ask what are the interviewee's motivations, what was and what is their place in the community, what does the text say about how they want to be viewed, and what does their story tell us about everyday railway culture and politics? Motivations complicate the task of teasing out the transcript's meanings, but they do not invalidate the interview as a historical source. For example, when rieleras insist that they did not participate in the movement and then, in their next breath, describe how they aided workers hiding in mountains by bringing them food or by housing them so they could elude authorities, I conclude that they participated in the movement but that social and cultural factors invalidate their form of participation. Buttressed by scattered newspaper, archival, and oral sources, their involvement becomes a "fact" in the story, and the sociocultural ideology and practice — i.e., railway patriarchy — that negates their form of participation becomes a subject of further analysis.

To say that interviews are produced with subjective interests in mind and are imbued with emotional residues is to recognize what is true of all archival sources. Love letters, court cases, police reports, congressional records, embassy reports — these all express subjective opinions produced within a sociocultural web that shape their articulation. As when assessing traditional sources, I check oral histories against each other as well as against archival sources. When a piece of information provided by an interviewee is either too farfetched or simply uncorroborated by other sources, I use the opportunity to delve into the meaning of the discrepancy or simply warn the reader that the information cannot be corroborated but is nevertheless of interest for what it might tell us about the collective memory of the rank and file.

Such is the case in my analysis of the *charrazo* of 1948, the infamous episode when deposed union official Jesús Díaz de León led a coup

against STFRM leadership and, with the support of President Alemán, became the secretary general of the union. Officials compliant to the government went on to control the union from 1948 to 1958. In chapter 1, I argue that the charrazo symbolized the culmination of a struggle between workers and company and political administrations over how best to industrialize the country. Chronicling the founding of both the industry and of organizations in defense of workers' rights, I show that World War II and the postwar period provided an opening for PRI presidents Ávila Camacho and Alemán to reintroduce policies that would modernize the industry at the expense of workers' salaries and workplace control. These debates were recorded in the minutes of the FNM consultants' meetings, which in the 1940s brought together FNM, STFRM, and state officials to discuss issues ranging from modernizing yards and rails to workers' salaries. These minutes became available after the privatization of the industry in 1997 and have never before been used by scholars. Together with union and company publications, they give us a blow-by-blow account of the debates regarding railroad and national modernization. In addition, I argue that the historical memory of the charrazo has been complicated by the now prevalent view that charros and their supporters were traitors. Rather than present testimonies as straightforward facts, I ask what conflicting oral histories reveal about the event and its impact on the railway community.

Interviews have also been instrumental in enabling me to reconstruct power dynamics within workplaces and neighborhoods. Rieleros and rieleras had a sense of community identity that was rife with tension and conflicts. Women and men cared about one another, but they also fought, bickered, and cheated on one another. Workplace and neighborhood hierarchies exacerbated conflicts and disagreements, which scholars have come to view as constitutive of community.⁴³ This study demonstrates how railway work—and the railway movement—led to both camaraderie and discord. By plotting the strategies that workers used to overcome or suppress these tensions, I present the movement as a contingent process determined by grassroots activists' organizing.

I show in chapter 2 that despite workplace hierarchies and interpersonal disputes, rieleros and rieleras developed intimate relationships and a cohesive collective culture based on everyday interactions in neighborhoods and at workplaces. I refute the corporatist literature that characterizes labor as docile and impotent during the 1950s by making use of reports from the Dirección Federal de Seguridad (DFS), oral histories, workers' dossiers, and the union paper to show that the early 1950s witnessed the birth of a rank-and-file resistance movement to *charro* rule. These dissidents became leaders when the railway movement exploded a few years later. Founded in 1947 by President Alemán, the DFS placed agents at public union meetings and on streets near worksites. As historian Tanalis Padilla points out, these agents often exaggerated threats in order to justify their existence, but even so, the sources are important because they helped shape state policy.⁴⁴ In the case of the railroad workers, agents proved to be remarkably prescient.

Chapters 3 and 4 detail the complexity of the world rieleros and rieleras made as well as the obstacles they overcame to organize a mass movement. I show how squabbles, dissent, and repression within the railway community could be productive, enabling rieleros and rieleras to build a national movement. By physically punishing or ostracizing those who did not join, dissident leaders and everyday activists demanded that workers take sides, leading to the enlistment of those who were otherwise apathetic as well as those who were sympathetic to the movement but afraid of getting fired. The threat of public scorn was often the deciding factor in attaining their support. But public humiliation and physical coercion would not have been sufficient to rally workers if there had not already been widespread discontent with STFRM leaders. Chapter 3 argues that the railway movement began as a result of this mass discontent with *charro* rule, quickly coming to represent a national grassroots movement to democratize STFRM union politics. It ends with the unlikely victory of railway dissidents, as they managed to circumvent *charro* rule, gained concessions from a direct meeting with President Ruiz Cortines, and finally elected Demetrio Vallejo to the post of secretary general of their union.

Chapter 4 argues that with the rise of Vallejo, expectations among the grassroots rose dramatically, leading men and women to push the new independent leaders to make demands for higher wages. A political struggle for union independence had turned into a movement for economic justice. This struggle became what Antonio Gramsci has termed a “war of position,” which in this context refers to the battle between workers and FNM officials to win over public opinion.⁴⁵ This war of position took place on both a discursive field that included print media as well as the physical terrain of the city and countryside. In both arenas, activists sought to shape the political debate, persuade the broader public to join them, and pressure the state to give in to their demands. The state and company fought back through editorials, public speeches, and ultimately with brute force. Finally I show that solidarity among all rieleros and rieleras was never fully achieved but was rather always a practice-in-process, requiring constant strengthening and vigilance.

Chapter 5 turns to the repression of the rank and file in March 1959. It argues that the fall of the independent railroad movement was a consequence of the STFRM’s decision to strike against the Ferrocarriles de Yucatán, Terminal de Veracruz, Ferrocarriles Mexicanos, and Ferrocarril del Pacífico, all of which were privately administered. Unlike the FNM, the president had no authorization to unilaterally negotiate—and make concessions—on behalf of private firms. I maintain that Vallejo and STFRM leaders followed rank-and-file calls for agitation against these companies, not the other way around. I argue, furthermore, that the Cold War struggle between communism and capitalism provided an ideological idiom that facilitated the PRI’s repression of the movement. While dissidents based their demands on the Constitution of 1917, detractors accused them of following the lead of communists in an effort to ultimately overthrow the government.

Along with chapters 3 and 4, chapter 5 makes use of U.S. State Department records. These documents are extraordinarily revealing because they express sympathy for the very workers accused of communism by the PRI. While the spread of communism drew the concern of U.S. officials, they concluded that the movement was motivated pri-

marily by political corruption, economic deprivation, and workers' desire to control their union. Communist ideology had little influence among workers. In other words, U.S. State Department documents affirm many of the claims made by the rank and file at the time.

This study takes mostly a national view of railway life and politics by placing the stories of everyday activists and organizers within a macro-level narrative of Mexican political economy. This approach is consistent with the unfolding of the railway movement, which covered the entire country, from Baja California to Chiapas. More important, it reflects the economic organization of the industry as embodied by the FNM and the political organization of workers expressed in the STFRM. These were national institutions whose policies evenly applied to employees and members throughout the country. Dissidents in turn made demands that would benefit every railway family in the country. A regional study would fail to capture the extensive reach of the industry, the union, and the movement.

My interviews, however, are principally with *rieleros* and *rieleras* from Matías Romero, Mexico City, and Puebla, cities housing some of the largest populations of railway men and women. Because I worked in Puebla's Centro de Documentación e Investigación Ferroviarias (CEDIF), the main railroad archive, *rieleros* and *rieleras* there and in Mexico City were simply more accessible to me. As mentioned above, after many months of failing to get women in these two cities to talk to me, I made a trip to Matías Romero, where widows eagerly spoke to me about their lives as *rieleras* as well as their participation in the movement. I extend the geographic scope with archival material referencing San Luis Potosí and Monterrey, where two of the larger repair yards stood. These sources enable me to add texture to the national story by exploring regional details. This book tells the story of how men and women in these cities came together en masse to temporarily roll back an emerging conservative political and economic order. In hoping to retain the gains made by the working class by the revolution, they found themselves turned into political radicals.