

BUFFINGTON, Robert. *A Sentimental Education for the Working Man: The Mexico City Penny Press, 1900–1910*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2015. ISBN 978-0-822-35882-4. Pp. 304. Hardback \$25.95.

In the last ten years, scholars have examined with renewed interest the social and artistic milieu of the “Porfiriato” era (1876–1911), when liberal dictator Porfirio Díaz occupied the Mexican presidency. Historians have long equated the Porfiriato with modernization, urbanization, and capitalist expansion. Only more recently have scholars begun examining the era’s relatively unknown cultural production. Robert Buffington’s *A Sentimental Education for the Working Man: The Mexico City Penny Press, 1900–1910* is a welcome addition to a growing number of volumes devoted to uncovering this side of Porfirian life.

Buffington’s study is best situated alongside Pablo Piccato’s work on the public sphere in nineteenth-century Mexico, as well as William Beezley’s investigations of popular culture. The volume also shares a political vantage point with Robert Irwin’s work on masculinity in Mexico; both researchers trouble monolithic notions of Mexican masculinity as they interrogate what Octavio Paz (among countless others) have signaled as the malaise par excellence of Mexican men: machismo. Specifically, Buffington’s new text aims to “reconstruc[t] the complex, shifting, and contradictory ideas about manhood, especially working-class masculinity” (6), claiming that “penny press editors and contributors offered up a sentimental education for workers” (6). In order to substantiate this thesis, Buffington provides close readings of satiric penny press newspapers written for workers during, roughly, the second half of the Porfiriato (1900–1910).

Although *A Sentimental Education* suffers from Buffington’s somewhat facile distinction between the working class and the bourgeoisie—distinctions that belie the Porfiriato’s petit bourgeoisie, its coterie of *tanda*-attending nighthawks, and other *advenedizos* (parvenus)—he adeptly balances gender theories, detailed literary analysis, and his formidable knowledge of the Porfiriato. The text will be of great interest to cultural historians of Mexico as well as literary critics. All told, Buffington’s book tasks academics to more closely study those everyday Mexican citizens whose lives did not jive with Díaz’s ironclad modernizing project.

In chapter one, “Working-Class Heroes”, Buffington employs Williams’ notions of a “structure of feelings” and Gramsci’s theory of a “war of position” in order to show how the penny press “transformed official liberal icons like Hidalgo and Juárez into working-class heroes” (49). Here, Buff-

ington masterfully analyzes various newspaper illustrations, proving how their spatial organization ultimately bolsters their gestalt meaning: stated differently, illustrators aimed to harmonize the form and (political) function of their art. Thus hegemonic figures are normally represented on an image's left side, while society's downtrodden are found on the right side. This chapter may be the text's most lasting contribution, as it provides future scholars with an interpretative toolkit for comprehending newspaper illustrations.

In chapter two, "One True Juárez", Buffington proposes that as part of the penny press's ongoing war of position, editors did not attack Díaz directly but rather, "preferred to exalt [former president Benito] Juárez and let the implicit contrast between the two men speak for itself" (69). This proves a difficult argument to make, seeing that the Porfirian elite also lionized Juárez, but in order to legitimate Díaz. Admittedly, opposition journalists did forward Juárez as a foil to Díaz's dictatorship: yet Juárez's appellation as "working-class" is not wholly convincing. Indeed, the chapter's thesis, while provocative, would have benefited from specific textual examples of Juárez represented as a working-class hero. A closer study of Porfirian-era newspapers and speeches, I believe, would suggest that Juárez was understood as a romantic hero, a common man who transcended the everyday thanks to his elevated spirit. What Buffington fails to note is that, time and time again, Porfirians of diverse social statuses pointed up the simple, gentle, but firm "carácter" of Juárez, the onetime Zapotec shepherd from the bucolic hills of Oaxaca.

With chapter three, "The Apotheosis of the Working Man", Buffington convincingly argues that the penny press aimed to position the working class into the "national narrative as active participants whose humble but heroic contributions to nation building warranted their inclusion" (101). In particular, the chapter deals with the August 20, 1847 Battle of Churubusco, when the invading American army was met admirably by a ragtag group of working-class citizens. Although they put up a good fight, the Churubusco battalion eventually ceded to the Americans. The history of the Churubusco military contingent is truly a counter narrative. The author astutely compares the faded memory of the Churubusco fighters to the famed *Niños Héroes*—the martyred cadets who also perished at the hands of American soldiers but, unlike the Churubusco fighters, live on in Mexico's national lore. This chapter, too, is one of Buffington's most important contributions.

The final two chapters make provocative but somewhat specious claims regarding the representation of gender in the Porfirian-era penny press.

According to Buffington, via comic vignettes and “street-talk” columns, blue collar newspapers “constructed loving portraits of Mexico City’s working-class” (141) that served to interrogate traditional (monolithic and macho) conceptions of masculinity. In the fifth chapter, Buffington examines a series of comical newspaper vignettes about rogue womanizer Don Juan—a figure originally from Spain, but who was celebrated annually in Mexico during Day of the Dead theatrical productions. Buffington reads the vignettes’s respective representations of Don Juan as “sly jibes at [his] manhood” (212), thus proposing that the penny press’s take on Don Juan troubles male identity and ultimately forwards a tamer, less macho subject position.

Although this interpretation may have some purchase, another figure was treated to a type of Bakhtinian carnivalization in nineteenth century Mexico: Don Quixote. Should Mexico’s satiric take on Don Juan be understood as emblematic of novel gendering techniques or, rather, is undermining the myth of Don Juan yet another example of how the petit bourgeoisie parodied received hegemonic culture? Somewhat suspect is Buffington’s omission of an immensely successful play that debuted in Mexico City in March of 1911, *El tenorio maderista* (*The Madero-ist Tenorio*), in which revolutionary Francisco I. Madero is cast (in a positive light) as Don Juan. Those of the Porfirian persuasion were not as concerned with gender as we are; rather, they took a mischievous joy in ironically modifying ready-made artistic templates to fit the current events of their day.

As a final note, one cannot help but wonder if Buffington would have reached the same conclusions had he looked beyond the extensive yet partial selection of newspapers located at University of Texas Austin’s Benson Latin American Collection. For instance, he does not mention sources housed in Mexico City’s Hemeroteca Nacional (National Newspaper and Periodical Library) and the Archivo General de la Nación (General Archive of the Nation), which have yet to be documented via microform technology.

In sum, with *A Sentimental Education for the Working Man*, Buffington bravely interrogates not a few of the interpretative commonplaces surrounding the Porfiriato, Mexican masculinity, and the working class. Although some of the book’s analyses wear too thin, the text should be praised for opening up new discussions among scholars of Mexico from a range of fields.

Kevin Anzzolin
Dickinson State University