

# I N P R I N T

## Mexico's uncivil society

By James North

**T**his book explains better than any newspaper a central contradiction in contemporary Mexican society: why Mexico's ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) can continue to win millions of votes in presidential elections even though most Mexicans, including many who voted for the PRI, continue to regard the party as corrupt. *Mexican Lives* is a well-crafted and extraordinarily valuable look at Mexico today through the lives of 15 of its inhabitants—and, more broadly, an examination of how people in the Third World are adapting to the wrenching changes of today's global economy.

Judith Adler Hellman's subjects range from Mercedes Pacheco, who earns a few pesos selling fruit in a Mexico City marketplace, to Rubén Ergas, a successful textile manufacturer. Hellman, a professor of political science at York University in Toronto, also takes us into the countryside for a revealing look at the changes in Mexican agriculture, and to the U.S. border, where she introduces us to Maria del Rosario Valdez, who makes the 15- to 16-hour bus trip from Mexico City every week to buy used clothing she will resell.

Hellman shows us a Mexico in dramatic transition. After decades of growth, its industries protected by high tariff walls, the Mexican economy hit a roadblock of debt in the early '80s. Unsuccessful efforts to keep up with the repayments helped plunge the economy into a precipitous decline. And so, under considerable outside pressure, the ruling party abandoned protectionism and turned toward what Mexicans know as "neoliberalism" and what we call "free market reforms." Hellman's book shows in detail the changes such decisions have wrought on ordinary Mexicans. Miguel Ramírez, who sells imported electronic goods in an open-air market, cannot even consider a factory job—real wages have fallen so dramatically that his income would drop to a quarter of what it is now.

But Mexico's industrialists have also been left reeling. When Bernardo Navarro, a manufacturer, begins to talk about "the ineptitude of the government planners whose policies he holds responsible for the destruction of whole sectors of the Mexican electronics industry," Hellman writes,

"he struggles for the right words and switches to English, perhaps to distance himself from the emotions he feels."

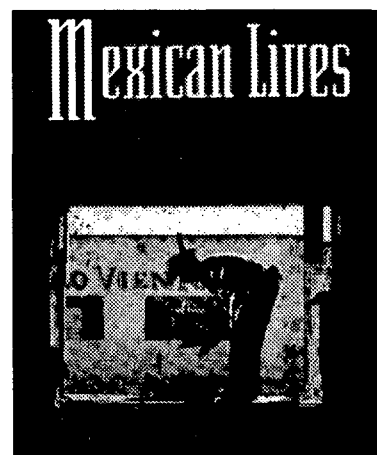
Despite the misery, the ruling party has been able to hold onto its position largely through a politics of patronage that extends down to the smallest sidewalk vendor. What may look to the tourist like a haphazard collection of mini capitalists is actually a tightly organized network in which regular rent is paid to patrons—and anyone foolish enough to try to set up independently would rapidly be hustled off by the police.

Conchita Gómez's shantytown, for example, voted overwhelmingly for the opposition leader Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas in the 1988 presidential election. But then the ruling PRI began to respond in typical patron style—and President Salinas himself showed up to announce that the community would get real sewers. Gómez's neighbors do not like the PRI, but they also see it as a tool to get the services they so desperately need. It is likely that most of them voted for the PRI this time around.

The antidote to such clientelism is strong democratic organization—the development of a "civil society" in communities and workplaces. Hellman shows us some of those who have contributed the most to democratic reform. Gómez, for example, joined a neighborhood group after corrupt speculators sold her family a shantytown lot that the speculators did not, in fact, own. A remarkable married couple, the teachers Roberto Martínez and Alicia Pérez, emerged from the political turmoil of the Mexican universities in the '60s, and have continued to keep the faith, organizing democratic currents within the government-dominated teachers' union as they try to get by on declining salaries.

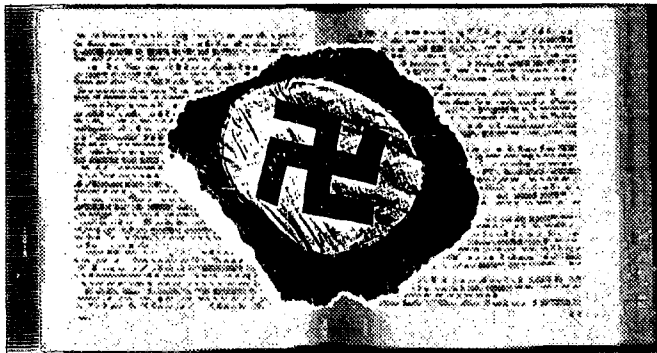
Yet the obstacles to real democratic renewal are serious. The people in this book are extraordinarily hard-working and resourceful, traveling great distances to carry out complicated income-earning schemes. But most of them work more or less alone, selling goods from meager stalls, cleaning houses and so on. The factories that once brought many of them together are closing; we will have to wait to see what kind of industries will emerge under the new system, what kinds of organization will arise in them and what kinds of alliances North Americans can build with them.

James North writes regularly on Third World politics for *In These Times*.



**Mexican Lives**  
By Judith Adler Hellman  
The New Press  
244 pp., \$22.95

# SPEED READING



**Free to Hate: The Rise of the Right in Post-Communist Eastern Europe**  
By Paul Hockenos  
Routledge  
330 pp., \$16.95

A sense of euphoria overtook the Western Hemisphere in 1989 as communist regimes toppled across Eastern Europe and yesterday's dissidents became today's heads of state. Soviet bloc nations one by one professed their commitment to free elections and free enterprise, and the final triumph of Western liberal values seemed imminent. Five years later, Western onlookers seemed baffled by the emergence of fascistic political groups and ethnic cleansing campaigns reminiscent of Hitler's Final Solution.

In his book, *Free to Hate: The Rise of the Right in Post-Communist Eastern Europe*, Paul Hockenos demystifies the disturbing tide of nationalism and xenophobia that is sweeping East Germany, Hungary, Romania, the Czech Republic and Poland. His investigation of the current social, political and economic situation in Eastern Europe explores everything from neo-Nazi youth culture to the historical roots of regional ethnic rivalries.

Hockenos, *In These Times*' Eastern Europe correspondent, points out that the region's new nationalistic movements combine ethnic chauvinism and economic populism with the worst that communism had to offer. "As much as the citizens may have resented the party dictatorship and the Kafkaesque security apparatus," he writes, "many had come to rely upon the existence of a strong paternalistic force in their lives." In a great leap backward, Eastern Europe's ultra-conservative parties peddle a peculiar brand of late-20th-century anti-Semitism that "rejects the common Enlightenment values that underpin both [Bolshevism and liberalism]: their internationalism; their shared notions of equality, technological advancement and reason; [and] their emphasis on urban culture."

Hockenos intersperses his political analysis with reports of horrific acts of violence, gross violations of human rights and excerpts from fascist publications that speak for themselves. The lyrics of a Hungarian skinhead "oi band," for example, advocate the use of "machine guns, flamethrowers and atomic bombs to exterminate their racially inferior foes." But perhaps the most appalling development Hockenos describes is the West's abandonment of "the other Europe," despite enthusiastic promises of monetary aid and moral support.

The book, though, gives little indication of the actual scale of popular support for extreme right-wing agendas. Hockenos wavers between the impulse to evoke outrage and a desire to remain optimistic, leaving the reader with an impression of a rabidly fascistic Eastern Europe that can yet be redeemed through the benevolence of the West. Nevertheless, as an account of history in the making, *Free to Hate* (now available in an updated paperback edition) will both horrify and educate.

—Aushra Abouzeid

**Reasonable Creatures: Essays on Women and Feminism**  
By Katha Pollitt  
Alfred A. Knopf  
186 pp., \$20

When, in the midst of the 1992 campaign, Dan Quayle launched his attack upon single mothers both fictional and real, he was careful to avoid dwelling too specifically on the complicated series of decisions, half-decisions and accidents that lead women to raise children on their own. For Quayle, single motherhood was simply a self-indulgent "lifestyle choice."

It's hard to respond to charges this vague, which is why such stern and meaningless rhetoric remains so popular with politicians—and which is why both Quayle and Bill Clinton have returned to the family values theme, both of them rehashing the old platitudes with all the sincerity and passion they and their speechwriters can muster.

One of the most intelligent and insightful responses to Quayle's bromide (and to the invocation of "family values" by politicians of all stripes) came from essayist and poet Katha Pollitt, a frequent contributor to *The Nation* and *The New Yorker* and one of the country's most provocative writers on feminist issues. Her essay—included in her new collection *Reasonable Creatures*—moved quickly from the realm of platitudes to a careful and specific consideration of what, on an everyday level, "family values" really mean. She described the ways the "debate" over values shifted the terms of the discussion from the real to the symbolic, carefully eliding the role of the government in perpetuating real problems—the gender gap in wages, the lack of affordable child care—that put real single mothers in such a bind.

As a recently divorced single mother herself, Pollitt knew a bit more about the subject than the boy vice president—