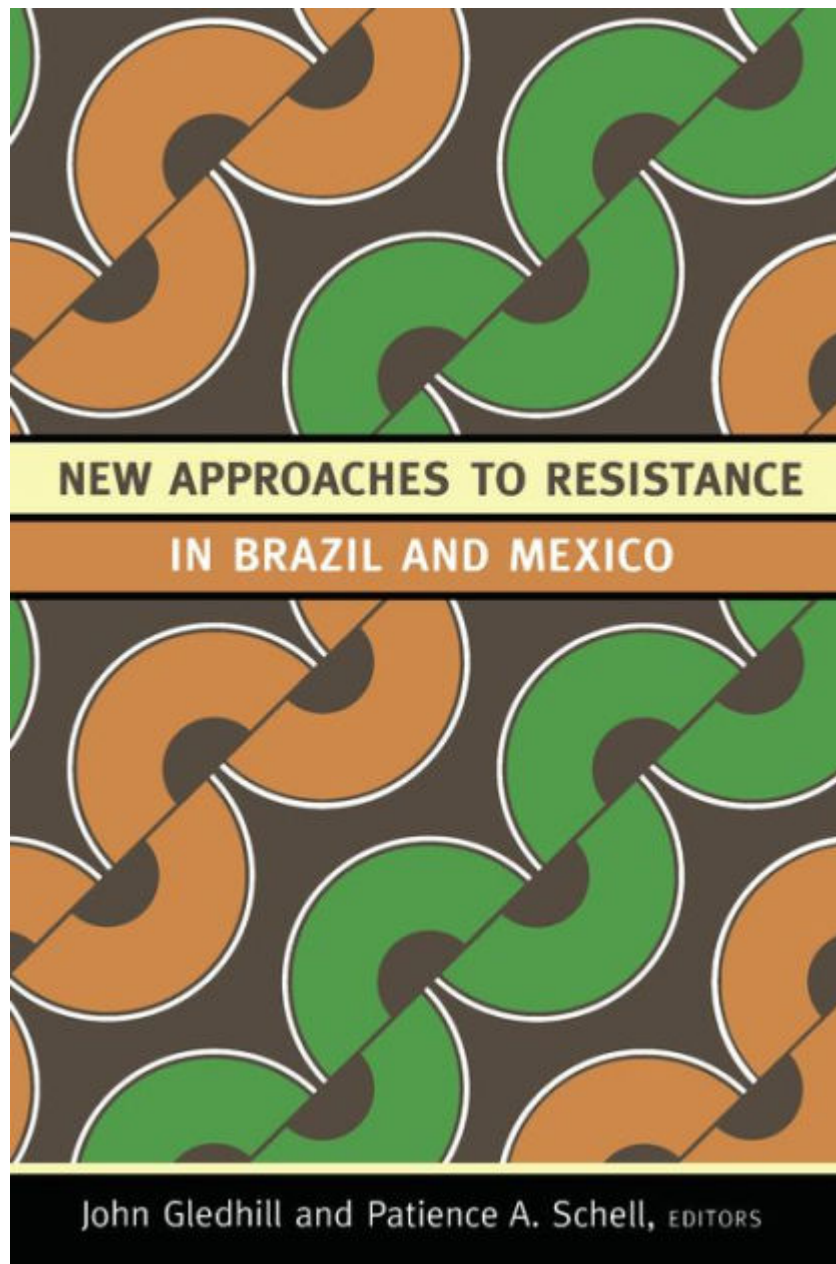


# {essays in history}

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## New Approaches to Resistance in Brazil and Mexico



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### Reviewed Work(s)

*New Approaches to Resistance in Brazil and Mexico*. Edited by John Gledhill and Patience A. Schell (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012). Pp. 416. Cloth, \$99.95. Paper, \$28.95.

This volume of fifteen essays contextualizes forms of resistance in Mexico and Brazil by placing them within a wider context of resistance studies. Arising out of research seminars funded by the British Arts and

Humanities Research Council in Bahia, Mexico City, and Manchester, England between 2007 and 2008, the essayists resurrect resistance studies as a viable and important area of study. After enjoying an academic boom in the 1980s, resistance studies languished under a chorus of scholarly critiques during the following decade. As a response to these necessary and beneficial criticisms, as the editors are keen to note, this volume contributes rich understandings of a subfield that is experiencing a major academic overhaul.

Despite encompassing the contributions of sociologists and historians, the volume owes most to the field of anthropology. Indeed, the two case studies of Mexico and Brazil serve as centers of theoretical comparison between distinct “constructs” of human societies. Despite this, many of the essays in the volume are also grounded in decidedly historical perspectives. The text is organized into three parts, and the first considers Amerindian and African (and mulatto) resistance movements between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. The second part combines historical and ethnographical perspectives to evaluate religious and spiritual movements of resistance, and the third section consists entirely of ethnographical case studies that outline the contemporary resistance landscape in Brazil and Mexico. A thoughtful introduction by John Gledhill and a comprehensive conclusion by Alan Knight sketch out the debates central to resistance studies and provide useful thematic roadmaps for a very complex and theoretical field.

The essays carefully deconstruct and reevaluate “first wave” resistance scholars’ attempts at understanding acts and discourses of resistance. Gledhill and Knight argue, by underscoring subalterns’ myriad forms of agency, that the previous generation of resistance scholars did little to appreciate the operability of the disadvantaged within formal and institutional structures of power. John Monteiro’s chapter, for example, makes a convincing argument to cast away studies from the past that construct static, traditional, and disengaged subalterns. He makes an important plea to scholars of conquest and colonial Latin America by arguing that one must study subaltern peoples as agents of their own historical development since they negotiated unique sociocultural milieus in the New World by adopting Europeans’ “objects, strategies, and discourses” (27). Helga Baitenmann’s study of land reform in contemporary Mexico draws from court petitions of thousands of

campesinos (rural peasants) who have appealed to their government to extend a process of land reform that officially ended in 1992. The proliferation of these appeals highlights campesinos' ability to mine the institutions and discourses of the influential in order to enact policies that benefit "popular" Mexicans.

That there exists neither a unified "subaltern" movement nor culture is an important thematic thread that is woven through each of the essays in the volume. The chapters by Juan Pedro Viqueira and Marcus de Carvalho explore eighteenth century Mexican Amerindian and nineteenth century rebellions in backland Brazil, respectively, and provide excellent insights into the divergent, and often conflicting, paths of the "popular classes" usually presumed to be the unquestioned standard-bearers of resistance movements. From a contemporary standpoint, Margarita Zárate's study of Mexico's Unión de Comuneros Emiliano Zapata (UCEZ, Emiliano Zapata Union of Communal Landholders) recapitulates the theme of subaltern disunity. She illuminates both individuals' conflicting processes of "self-creation," and how they negotiated and understood their place within their world and within the "imagined communities" created by subalterns' diverse agendas.

Many of the essays integrate gender into their studies of resistance, and hence widen notions of subalternity and agency. Patience Schell's fascinating account of the elite Unión de Damas Católicas Mexicanas (UDCM, Union of Catholic Mexican Women) shows that elite women engaged with norms of femininity (namely that they were "naturally" religious and emotional) in order to "leverage positions of authority" and to challenge the anticlerical attitudes of 1920s postrevolutionary Mexico. Zárate's analysis of the UCEZ dovetails with Schell's observations of females' roles in the UDCM to consider the "performance" of passivity, arguing that women's silence or inarticulateness are forms of "strategic action." Much remains to be said, however, of women's roles in politics. One might consider the underrepresentation of females in elected positions throughout Latin America and ask how those elected to public office reconcile their subaltern status with formal power.

Although this volume is a masterful undertaking, some important historical actors were not included, most notably Brazil's Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem Terra (MST, Landless Workers' Movement) and

myriad indigenous rights organizations. Given the combination of anthropological and historical perspectives interwoven throughout the volume, a discussion of these groups and their rich historical trajectories would have been timely and noteworthy explorations. Furthermore, the essays in the second portion of the volume shy away from a consideration of important trans-regional religious movements, such as liberation theology, that provided a rich reserve of symbolic discourses through which individuals and resistance movements confronted societal anomie throughout the twentieth century.

The essays are decidedly theoretical in orientation and some general readers would encounter difficulty sifting through loaded terms that lack scholarly consensus, such as agency, subalternity, and hegemony. As a result, the volume is perhaps best suited for graduate students or advanced undergraduates. Nevertheless, the essays selected by Gledhill and Schell engage in lively discussions among themselves and across chapter lines, highlighting differences in terminology and offering alternative uses for conceptual frameworks. Complexity and discord are the thematic hinges of the volume, and the reader can observe through rich trans-temporal case studies that resistance is spoken and unspoken, active and inert, and flows through disheveled grids of class, ethnicity, gender, loyalty and power. Gledhill and Schell's volume remains an important and welcome contribution to Latin American studies, especially amid burgeoning interests in power, identity politics, and "imagined communities."

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