

Book Review

– *From protest to the presidency: Grassroots mobilisation in Mexico City*, by
Hélène Combes. Palgrave Macmillan, 2026

Hélène Combes's latest book examines the political movement that emerged in Mexico in the wake of the 2006 post-electoral conflict and culminated in the election of Andrés Manuel López Obrador in 2018. Internationally, these years were marked by social movements organised around the occupation of public squares, particularly in 2011 during the "Arab Spring", the Spanish 15-M, or the Occupy movement. The subject of the book is situated within this global cycle of protests, not to compare Mexico with these cases, but rather to decentre the perspective of the specialised scholarly literature by turning its gaze toward Latin America through the Mexican case. From this perspective, the book engages in a critical dialogue with a sociology of social movements that has been produced predominantly in North American and European contexts, with a dual purpose: "namely to understand how the context of Latin American societies fashions specific ways of campaigning, while avoiding the distortion of observed realities by 'analytical lenses'" (p. 227). To this end, the book draws on a rich body of empirical material gathered through a decade of fieldwork in Mexico City. Thanks to this long-term, longitudinal ethnographic research, Hélène Combes traces the life trajectories of activists who were members of grassroots organisations in their respective neighbourhoods. This biographical analysis, based on a sample of four individual cases, is complemented by interviews with key figures, including Claudia Sheinbaum – now President of Mexico – to combine a bottom-up perspective (that of the activists) with a top-down one (that of political leaders).

The book is divided into two parts. In the first, the author revisits the different episodes that make up the cycle of protest under study, beginning with the 2006 post-electoral conflict and the sit-in organised on Reforma Avenue (Chapter 1), followed by the Adelitas movement, led by Claudia Sheinbaum (Chapter 2), and concluding with the creation of the National Regeneration Movement (MORENA) in 2011 (Chapter 3), which has since become Mexico's ruling party. The second part examines how these events became embedded in activists' everyday lives over the long term. Each protagonist's trajectory is explored in a separate

chapter, illustrating different facets of activist practices that shed light on both the episodes described above and the social conditions that made the 2018 electoral victory possible. The book's four protagonists are Dario López, the head of a neighbourhood association in Santo Domingo (Chapter 4); Sandra Vázquez, a junior public official and resident of Iztapalapa (Chapter 5); Señor Santos Rivera, a merchant in the Historic Centre (Chapter 6); and Señora Sol Estrada, an activist with a housing association and resident of the Tránsito neighbourhood (Chapter 7). All four participate in the sit-in López Obrador called on Reforma – the event with which the book begins – following his defeat in the 2006 presidential election.

From Protest to the Presidency thus engages, through the Mexican case, with a sociology of social movements that has become increasingly autonomous as a field of study, in a process of specialisation that has distanced it from the discipline's broader questions. The book rightly takes a critical stance toward this tendency and, consequently, proposes reaffirming the centrality of relations between social categories in structuring collective action. In particular, it focuses on class relations, both among activists themselves and between activists and movement leaders, to demonstrate the importance of differences in the possession of social capital, translated into activist capital, for understanding the dynamics of mobilisation. For this reason, the research design bears a clear affinity with the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu, insofar as it is concerned with the social conditions of protest: “by repositioning the social belonging of campaigners and protesters at the heart of our understanding of activism, we may increase the generality of our analysis” (p. XV). It does so from a micro-sociological perspective – drawing here on Erving Goffman – that once again places the individual at the centre of social movements. In this way, the life stories of four ordinary activists in grassroots organisations interrogate both the minor and major questions surrounding collective action.

This methodological approach is particularly original in the Mexican context, where studies tend to focus on large organisations, collectives, and groups rather than individuals. By contrast, “taking life stories as a starting point further qualifies the view we may take of top-down mobilisation. In Mexico City, activism responds to local rationales that are deeply woven into the fabric of daily and neighbourhood life, rather than connected to a leader” (p. 227). This bottom-up perspective also helps capture the territorial dimension of activism, where mobilisation gains meaning within social networks deeply rooted in the neighbourhood. “There are many different local variations in activist practice across the city [...] which profoundly and variably impact on long-term adhesion to the cause from one neighbourhood to the next” (p. 227). The findings highlight the centrality of the colonia—as illustrated by the case of Señor Rivera—in shaping processes of politicisation that assign individuals a social role, condition their involvement in mobilisation, and orient their trajectories as activists.

Another analytical problem the book identifies is the tendency of Latin American sociology of social movements to overlook internal contradictions,

including relations of domination, power struggles, and disputes over what constitutes legitimate activism. From the very first chapter, Combes observes how the social division of activist labour operates through the concrete practices of the sit-in: “the working classes were in charge of holding the territory and of waiting. They slept at the camp, relayed one another, and, in many of the cases mentioned, had to be present at certain times of the day or week. With a few rare exceptions [...] the middle classes only came there during the day” (p. 29).

Inequalities in activist labour are not only a matter of social class; they also manifest through gender, as illustrated by the case of the *Adelitas*, examined in the second chapter. Despite demonstrating the militancy of these women activists, they “also often appeared in the role of submissive women carrying out López Obrador’s wishes. The women who worked closely with him were not always involved in decisions, even those at the head of the movement, such as Claudia Sheinbaum” (p. 70). This gendered division, in turn, affects the trajectories of women activists in distinctive ways, setting them apart from those of their male counterparts.

In this sense, the question of relations of domination within social movements, which distinguish participation from non-mobilisation in the processes linking everyday life and protest, is fundamental to understanding activism. This is where the book’s main contribution lies. It invites us to think about protest in terms of a moral economy – following E. P. Thompson – within which the conditions of production of mobilisation are inseparable from the reproduction of mobilised households. This is a dimension to which the sociology of social movements should devote greater attention, particularly in contexts of profound economic precariousness such as those found in Latin America.

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