Book Review of Herencias Secretas: Masonería, política y sociedad en México

David Merchant, Policy Studies Organization

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Freemasonry is in most Latin American countries often regarded as a mysterious organization that raises eyebrows. Skepticism about this fraternal society is based on the secrecy of its rituals and its involvement in some celebrated historical periods that, allegedly, shaped the political and cultural landscape in the region. Mexican freemasonry, according to De Los Reyes, had its share in the formation of a political culture that still prevails in the country. But to what extent is Freemasonry responsible for Mexico’s secular and liberal political thought? Herencias Secretas answers this question and is an historical tour de force examining the level of such responsibility.

In its introductory chapter, Herencias Secretas offers a needed and accessible panorama for both the specialist and general audiences. The multidisciplinary approach permits a wide variety of readers to understand the author’s thesis: Freemasonry’s impact in Mexico’s political discourse/thought. Additionally, this chapter opens the door to a remarkable research project because the author shows his skills to explore, digest, and present in a comprehensible way, information that usually appears in an abstract (if not arcane) jargon that characterizes Freemasonry.

De Los Reyes’s book is a successful exercise in rigorous academic objectivity exemplified in his definition of Freemasonry (p.21). He avoids a sensationalist tone and describes the fraternal society for what it really is. The author reveals the many channels through which Freemasonry has contributed to the formation of Mexico’s political and cultural life. He holds the reader’s attention because he describes Freemasonry in an analogous way to Masonic degrees, that is, the reader advances step by step towards more understanding. Moreover, De Los Reyes offers a balanced perspective about the controversial origins of the Masonic organization and adequately distinguishes the operative and symbolic aspects of the fraternal society. He accomplishes that with a well-trimmed and systematic history of the Freemasonry as an organized society and its arrival in Mexico.

In the first chapter of Herencias Secretas, there is remarkable historiography and use of primary sources (such as Inquisitorial trials), which sustain a major
component of the author’s thesis, that is, the opposition created by the Catholic Church in Colonial Mexico against enlightened thinkers that happened to be masons. He agrees with other scholars that Masonic lodges became by default the initial basis of Mexico’s civil society, nurturing educated men that, in most cases, pursued a liberal agenda. This foundational stage of Freemasonry, according to De Los Reyes, provided the platform for a liberal and secular discourse.

Chapters two, three, and four offer detailed analyses of Mexican historical periods that were clearly influenced by Freemasonry and its liberal ideas. Chapter two illustrates the animosity between the Catholic Church and Freemasonry prior, during, and after Independence was achieved in Mexico. The result, as we know, was the establishment of a secular state that thwarted the Church’s conservatism. Furthermore, this section of the book answers the following question: how responsible were Masonic lodges and its members for creating a political opposition to conservatism? De Los Reyes answers this query with a clever analysis about the Church’s attempt to censor freedom of press in Mexico and how Freemasonry became the agent of organized reaction towards such hostility. His exceptional research about El Monitor de los Masones, a Masonic pamphlet that was censored by the Church, corroborates his assertion that politics and Freemasonry were tightly intertwined in the promotion of a secular ideology.

As De Los Reyes explains, Freemasonry was the vehicle that represented an opposition to the Catholic Church but it also reflected a wide spectrum of political ideas. The York and Scottish Rites in 19th century Mexico were the instruments of contrasting politics shaping the first political parties. Despite their political differences and agendas, they united against their common fear: the Catholic Church’s involvement in government (State) matters. Thus both branches of Freemasonry acted in unison to promote a secular state in Mexico. This did not necessarily mean that they were always in good terms. Indeed, their differences accentuated over the formation and maturity of opposite political factions, which created tensions between liberal and conservative politics and ideologies. De Los Reyes affirms that this conflictive makeup of Mexican Freemasonry is unique in its nature, when juxtaposed to Anglosaxon Freemasonry’s characteristics, which maintained a distance from politics.

In chapter three of Herencias Secretas, De Los Reyes answers the following queries: how did Porfirio Díaz gain control of Mexican Freemasonry? And how did his control of the organization influence the Pax Porfiriiana? Further, the author documents the formation of an entity that briefly united various Masonic bodies under the authority of Porfirio Díaz, the Grand Symbolic Diet, and recounts Díaz’s despotic methods to control this fraternal organization. Given that Mexican Freemasonry in the 19th century was the gatekeeper of the political
elites, De Los Reyes argues that it was rather easy for Díaz to dominate its members, who by the nature of their Masonic allegiance were not going to question the authority of its leader. However, it must be mentioned that this was a period of ruthless politics and oppressive disciplinary actions rather than an instance of bonhomie. How then did Freemasonry in the Porfiriato promote a secular ideology? De Los Reyes suggests that Díaz maintained a cordial relationship of mutual respect with the Catholic Church but his membership within Freemasonry guaranteed the promotion of the liberal precepts inherited from Juarista freemasons. Perhaps this section can be enriched in future editions with an analysis of the Científicos, a group of intellectuals who helped Porfirio Díaz implement a progressive and liberal agenda under the motto of “order and progress,” who were members of his cabinet, and hence part of the political and economic elite. Was there a connection between the Científicos and Freemasonry? If so, were their progressive and economic policies supported by a philosophical ideology based on Freemasonry?

A “brotherhood without fraternity” is a noteworthy term coined by De Los Reyes describing the contradictory elements of 19th century Mexican Freemasonry. During the early decades of the 1800s two primary factions of Freemasonry led Mexico to a path of independence but were constantly contentious with one another. Under the mystified image of Benito Juárez, Freemasonry played an active role to promote the separation of the Church-State. But despite Porfirio Díaz’s efforts to unify and control the Masonic bodies in Mexico, some groups showed an open opposition towards his dictatorship. Hence this dissident faction got involved with a liberal movement led by Francisco I. Madero that gave way to the demise of the Porfiriato. Unfortunately, as a consequence of the lack of archival protection during the Mexican Revolution, De Los Reyes does not provide an overview of the Masonic movement of this period. However, he offers a useful study of post-revolutionary Freemasonry.

At the conclusion of the violent events of the Mexican Revolution, Freemasonry became again, according to De Los Reyes, an influential actor in promoting an anticlerical propaganda under the auspices of the Mexican government. Moreover, during and after the administration of Lázaro Cárdenas, Mexican Freemasonry became an active organization that again concentrated within its ranks the political elite. Similar to the Porfirio Díaz’s strategy to unify all Masonic groups in Mexico, Lázaro Cárdenas used the patronage of the institutional political party to spread his clientelistic politics within the Masonic lodges (and in Mexico in fact). An interesting contribution of this chapter is the clarification put forward by the author regarding the origins of the so-called “Cardenista Rite”. His analysis of Cardenista Freemasonry is another example of how this fraternal organization was used as an instrument to promote the political inclinations of the government in place.
Post-Cárdenas Mexican Freemasonry lost influence as a political actor but remains in Mexican society’s perception as a group advancing an anti-conservative agenda, which in turn benefited secularism and laicism in Mexico. Within the fraternal society there has been preoccupation, as De Los Reyes demonstrates with excerpts from Masonic publications, to regain the political weight that they once had during the 19th century and first decades of the 20th. Ironically, Freemasonry, as an agent of organized interests, should also consider acclimating to Mexico’s democratic life. As the reader of this book will attest De Los Reyes has paved the way for an open discussion about this most secret of societies and its influence in Mexico’s history.