

Vera S. Candiani: *Dreaming of Dry Land. Environmental Transformation in Colonial Mexico City*. Stanford: Stanford University Press 2014. 408 páginas.

Candiani's work is located at the cross-roads of Science and Technology Studies, Social History and Environmental History. It follows up on a couple of recent studies dealing with knowledge production and expertise on both sides of the Atlantic, especially on Chandra Mukerji's book on the Canal du Midi. The study investigates one of the most ambitious public work projects undertaken by Europeans in the early modern period: the Desagüe de Huehuetoca, i.e. the great canal constructed between 1607 and the end of the colonial period to drain the lakes in the middle of which Mexico City had been built. Candiani defends several important theses: the draining of the lakes exclusively benefited the city's inhabitants who feared the damage of their properties by floods; the indigenes provided an essential knowledge of hydrology, materials and topography (and of course workforce) without which the implementation of the project would not have been possible; the region's "underdevelopment" – or rather its "uneven and combined development", as the author prefers to call it (p. 301) – was the result of a heterogeneous group of elites colonizing a strong indigenous peasantry; the colonization process in the Americas was not very different from that in Europe and the resulting divergence was "far more contingent than is often admitted" (p. 312). According to Candiani, the Desagüe transformed "the broad, fluid relationships of indigenes with their lacustrine resources and seasonality into

more fixed and simplified ones" (p. 291), a process which she labels as "deep colonization" and in which "Hispanic urban and landed elites extended their control over the territory and its indigenous peasantry" (p. 296). Similar occurrences happened in Europe, but different from contemporary cases in England and France, the elites in New Spain did not pursue this type of colonization deliberately nor did they push for economic exploitation, preferring instead a rent-seeking behavior. Furthermore, in contrast to what happened with the European peasant commoners, in New Spain the state protected the indigenes. This explains not only the "uneven development" in that region but also why its peasantry was able to survive "as a class" (p. 310).

These rather strong claims form the framework (Preface, Introduction, and chapter 8) of the narrative. Its core consists of seven chronologically structured chapters which analyze and interpret – with utmost carefulness and an admirable technical and ecological background knowledge – the rich corpus of documentation produced in the context of the Desagüe construction. It starts with the indigenous hydraulic expertise existent before the Spanish invasion and portrays the development of the project in terms of its implementation, design, knowledge, purpose, social arrangements and ecological implications until the beginning of the 19th century. So how does the core of the book – depending nearly exclusively on documentation produced by city elites and technical experts – fit into the framework which gives the peasants such a strong weight? It occurs mainly utilizing two arguments: the long retention of

the *repartimiento* workforce (drafted rotational labor) and the genealogy of knowledge. Candiani argues that because of the ready availability of repartimiento peasants, these were used instead of applying or developing more efficient techniques of construction (or even using animals of burden). Moreover, their tacit knowledge was not only very influential but sometimes even valued by the authorities, remaining alive through the whole colonial period. Candiani omits, however, how the peasants' modes of production and livelihood actually changed as their land became impoverished due to the intensive environmental shifts. The reader has to confine himself to believing that the failure to firmly establish "capitalist progress" in Mexico was just the other side of a coin which allowed for an alternative (and more sustainable) manner of using land and water – together with making possible the survival of the people and their extensive knowledge adhering to it. But all in all, the book is excellently argued and clearly written, with the minor (though annoying) shortcoming of not having a listed bibliography.

JORUN POETTERING
(LUDWIG-MAXIMILIANS-UNIVERSITÄT
MÜNCHEN)