

BOOK REVIEW

Mexico in Focus: Political, Environmental and Social Issues

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Although this text is directed at an American audience, or at least English-speakers, it offers perspectives that go beyond studies from an American perspective: the essays in this volume do not keep Mexico at a distance. This book provides a platform from which one may observe Mexico using numerous perspectives, methodologies, and academic traditions, and may be read profitably, either from the proximity to Xalapa or from the distance of United States.

This book is highly ambitious, due to the diversity of the topics covered in its seventeen chapters. The editor divided these chapters into three sections, namely, Environment, Social Issues, and Politics. However I would like to emphasize the powerful historical trend in the text: the volume tells the history of the problems that Mexico has confronted and the public policies that it has adopted in attempts to solve these challenges. At the same time, another methodological thread that runs through the book, but is especially evident in the final four contributions, is that of political science. The authors are a distinguished group of scholars from both the United States and Mexico, and represent a combination of young researchers and prominent names recognized in their fields. The authors adopt distinct approaches, some long-term, others immediate, and several have made international or regional comparative observations. There are both regional case studies and nationwide analyses of institutional, ecological, economic, and social histories. Numerous books offer lip-service to interdisciplinarity, but few have made it across the disciplinary borders to provide new insights into the past, present, and future of Mexico as this one does.

Seven of the articles center on environmental themes, three of which take historical perspectives, while the rest come from varying disciplines, in their entirety they offer an excellent review of public policies regarding the environmental challenges facing Mexico. In his innovative article "Energía, medio ambiente y sociedad en el valle de México hasta el siglo XIX", Germán Vergara is Braudelian in his ability to grasp the great historical processes of what he called "the old regime" of energy consumption, based on biological, organic, and solar processes. His long-term vision allows us to understand the continuities between the pre-Hispanic world and that of the colonial system, emphasizing that, despite the numerous impacts of biological imperialism, such as abandoning the terrace systems that prevented erosion, the introduction of new crops and cattle that transformed the landscape, commencing the desiccation of the lakes, the ecological system of the Valley of Mexico demonstrated great resilience. He described the integration of different ecological areas of the valley that supported the vice-regal capital. Only with the introduction of a new energy order in the final decades of the nineteenth century, that is, oil, were dramatic changes in the ecological order experienced that put into doubt the sustainability of the valley.

Jonathan Graham's work pairs nicely with the first article, in its descriptions of the history of the lakes of the Valley of Mexico up to the present day. He relates the long history of the drainage of the valley, and the massive projects to lower lake levels and to expel its sewage waters to the Mezquital region. Moreover, he uses the background of the relationship between Valley of Mexico

and Mezquital to reconstruct the history of, not only the environment, but also the State's political behavior toward the Otomi Mezquital inhabitants from the authoritarian developmentalism of Don Porfirio to the arrogant neo-liberalism of today (without, of course, ignoring the long-term experience of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional political bosses). The contribution of Fernando Pérez Montesinos also touched on the indigenous societies, in this case the nineteenth century Purépechas from Michoacán and how they confronted the changes in public policies that affected the vast forests that occupy the plateau they occupy. The work of Montesinos falls within the new revisionist wave, which stresses that the division of communal lands was not simply imposed from outside, but partially resulted from internal divisions within communities stemming from population growth and the consequent competition over resources. The other important contributing factors were the liberal policies that promoted privatization and railroad construction that resulted in the transformation of Michoacán's forests after 1883.

Four chapters address contemporary environmental problems and, as one of the themes of this year's Feria Internacional del Libro Universitario is biodiversity, we must highlight the threats detailed by the authors concerning the regions from the Coahuila desert to the coasts of Yucatan. These authors express an overriding interest in highlighting the public policies that have brought us to the current circumstances, and propose projects to rescue our planet before it is too late. Here I would add two points: first, although everyone emphasizes the errors state policy, inadequate infrastructure, the wrong incentives, etc., it is well worth noting the observations made in Chapter 6, which asserts that the garbage crisis is a product of culture of mass consumption. A phenomenon best illustrated by the tendency of consumers to throw their plastic soft drink bottles wherever they damn well please. The State and corporations are not solely responsible. However, despite the rather gray landscape presented by the volumes contributors there are some grounds for optimism. For example, the study of the coastal seas in the Yucatan finds that in spite of the threats facing marine biodiversity the government's creation of maritime ecological reserves has succeeded in preserving the diversity of fish populations.

The section on social issues takes up the history of three different themes: the textile workers, water rights, and civil associations from the 1920s to the 1970s. José Galindo correctly describes the impact of changing labor laws and, I would say, the culture of the factory floor, on the development, or rather underdevelopment, of the textile industry. Galindo adopts the case study method, while Mikael Wolfe approaches the analysis of water rights from the perspective of the legal framework and public policy, presenting its history from the revolution until the present day. He described how technology also has made an impact on the expansion of the right to water and the "devolution", that is, the re-privatization, of public rights over this commodity.

In a groundbreaking article, David Tamayo describes the expansion of social and service clubs that took off in a surprising manner during Mexico's post-revolutionary and "Mexican miracle" years. His study of the social characteristics of the clubs, such as Rotario, Leones, etc., in Tijuana and Puebla leads him to propose the existence of a civil society in the glory days of PRI rule.

The volume includes three essays related to public policy on social questions. Roberto Velez Grajales and Juan Enrique Huerta Wong offer a powerful argument regarding the links between inequality and lack of mobility in Mexico, demonstrating that the social stratum into which one is born

determines the social protections enjoyed. As an added bonus, they take the time to refute some of the ideas of the American economist Milton Friedman. They call for concrete actions to remedy the situation, beginning with a few simple proposals for re-orienting value added tax and other subsidies to support, or at least stop grinding down, the poorer classes. Alejandro Villagomez's work makes a welcome addition to the topic since it addresses the issue of the pension system for the elderly in Mexico, first noting that the country is on the cusp of a crisis of an aging population. The article reports that, despite the reforms to the system, it does not have sufficient coverage, particularly for the working and middle classes, the pensions are inadequate and the contributions are too low to sustain the system. A second article by José Galindo reviews human rights policies and the history of permutations the National Commission on Human Rights has suffered since its founding in the context of the dubiously legitimate administration of Carlos Salinas de Gortari.. While his account of the institution's history is admirable, in my opinion, the greatest impact of the chapter is its sharp criticism of the inefficient and politicized behavior of the human rights bureaucracy, which should be of prime importance for all Mexicans.

To summarize, Mexicans do not have equality, do not have pensions, do not have human rights, and cannot even offer you a glass of water with which to quench your thirst: welcome to the twenty-first century.

The book ends with four excellent contributions on politics in the last two decades that will certainly be useful to readers. Here, I will abbreviate my comments to leave the job to my colleagues working in the salt mines of political science. Alberto Olvera's article asked whether the return of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) represents the end of the transition to democracy or the return to authoritarianism, but, as he is here beside me, he can give us the answer. It only remains for me to comment that we have before us a text that recounts the last 15 years in a concise and very fluent manner. As an historian, I was struck by the perspective of the José Antonio Hernández Company who discovered the roots of the behavior of opposition parties in their origins when they emerged at different stages of PRI's long period of domination. Gérman Stuht offers an analysis of the legislative output of the Mexican democratic transition and finds it largely wanting. The volume concludes with a brilliant essay by Andrew Paxman that describes Televisa's behavior as a major player in Mexican politics during the last three decades; it is very instructive essay to read in the present context of the "Mexican White House" scandal. As a group these four chapters offer an excellent review of the dilemmas of Mexico's frustrating democratic transition and should be read by anyone interested in current Mexican events.

Approximately 7 years ago I came to this country to look more closely at my fascinating object of study that has always been Mexico, and, since coming here, events and realities have left me so shocked and dismayed that I believe I have developed a strong case of astigmatism. Thankfully, this book has served well as a good pair of glasses to correct my vision, and I thank the editor for the opportunity to read it and to share it with the public. I invite you to read it, and spread the word, not only here in Mexico, but also abroad. Put on your glasses and take a new look at Mexico.

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