

THE MEXICO READER



HISTORY, CULTURE, POLITICS

Gilbert M. Joseph and Timothy J. Henderson, editors

SECOND EDITION, REVISED AND UPDATED

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THE MEXICO READER

HISTORY, CULTURE, POLITICS

SECOND EDITION, REVISED AND UPDATED

Gilbert M. Joseph and Timothy J. Henderson, editors

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Cover art: Young Mexican women dressed as La Catrina take part
in Day of the Dead festivities in Oaxaca, Mexico, October 31, 2019.

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Dedicated to the memory of Patricia Pessar



Contents

Acknowledgments xv

A Note on Style xvii

Introduction i

I *The Search for “Lo Mexicano”* ii

The Mexican Character, *Joel Poinsett* 13

The Cosmic Race, *José Vasconcelos* 17

The Sons of La Malinche, *Octavio Paz* 22

The Problem of National Culture, *Guillermo Bonfil Batalla* 30

How to Tame a Wild Tongue, *Gloria Anzaldúa* 34

Mexico City 1992, *Alma Guillermoprieto* 45

Two Ranchera Songs, *José Alfredo Jiménez and Cuco Sánchez* 56

II *Ancient Civilizations* 59

The Origins of the Aztecs, *Anonymous* 61

The Feast of the Flaying of Men, *Inga Clendinnen* 64

The Totocalli (Motecuhzoma’s “Zoo”), *Andrés Bustamante Agudelo*
and *Israel Elizalde Méndez* 69

The Meaning of Maize for the Maya, *J. Eric Thompson* 81

Omens Foretelling the Conquest, *Anonymous* 86

III *Conquest and Colony* 89

The Spaniards’ Entry into Tenochtitlán, *Bernal Díaz del Castillo*
and *Hernán Cortés* 91

Cortés and Montezuma, *J. H. Elliott* 99

The Battles of Tenochtitlán and Tlatelolco, *Anonymous* 103

The Spiritual Conquest, *Fray Jerónimo de Mendieta* 108

Why the Indians Are Dying, *Alonso de Zorita* 116

A Baroque Archbishop-Viceroy, *Irving Leonard* 125

On Men’s Hypocrisy, *Sor Juana* 137

UNIVERSITY
PRESS

Whites, Negroes, and Castes, <i>Alexander von Humboldt</i>	141
The Itching Parrot, the Priest, and the Subdelegate, <i>José Joaquín Fernández de Lizardi</i>	144

IV *Trials of the Young Republic* 153

The Siege of Guanajuato, <i>Lucas Alamán</i>	155
Sentiments of the Nation, or Points Outlined by Morelos for the Constitu- tion, <i>José María Morelos</i>	166
Plan of Iguala, <i>Agustín de Iturbide</i>	169
Women and War in Mexico, <i>Frances Calderón de la Barca</i>	173
The Glorious Revolution of 1844, <i>Guillermo Prieto</i>	182
<i>Décimas</i> Dedicated to Santa Anna's Leg, <i>Anonymous</i>	189
A Conservative Profession of Faith, <i>The Editors of El Tiempo</i>	192
Considerations relating to the Political and Social Situation of the Mexican Republic in the Year 1847, <i>Mariano Otero</i>	197
Liberals and the Land, <i>Luis González y González</i>	209
Standard Plots and Rural Resistance, <i>Raymond B. Craib</i>	216
Offer of the Crown to Maximilian, <i>Junta of Conservative Notables</i>	226
A Letter from Mexico, <i>Empress Carlota</i>	228
The Triumph of the Republic, 1867, <i>Benito Juárez</i>	233
Porfirio Díaz Visits Yucatán, <i>Channing Arnold and Frederick J. Tabor Frost</i>	236
Scenes from a Lumber Camp, <i>B. Traven</i>	241
President Díaz, Hero of the Americas, <i>James Creelman</i>	247
Gift of the Skeletons, <i>Anonymous</i>	254

Special Section

What Can Photographs Tell Us about Mexico's History?, <i>John Mraz</i>	257
--	-----

V *Revolution* 277

Land and Liberty, <i>Ricardo Flores Magón</i>	279
Plan of Ayala, <i>Emiliano Zapata and Others</i>	283
The Restoration of the <i>Ejido</i> , <i>Luis Cabrera</i>	288
Zapatistas in the Palace, <i>Martín Luis Guzmán</i>	295
Mexico Has Been Turned into a Hell, <i>William O. Jenkins</i>	300
Pancho Villa, <i>John Reed</i>	306
<i>La Punitiva</i> , <i>Anonymous</i>	314
Pedro Martínez, <i>Oscar Lewis</i>	317
Amelio Robles's Gender Battles in the Zapatista Army, <i>Gabriela Cano</i>	328
Juan the Chamula, <i>Ricardo Pozas</i>	338
The Constitution of 1917: Articles 27 and 123	348

An Agrarian Encounter, <i>Rosalie Evans</i>	353
Ode to Cuauhtémoc, <i>Carlos Pellicer</i>	356
The Socialist ABC's, <i>Anonymous</i>	361
The Ballad of Valentín of the Sierra, <i>Anonymous</i>	367
Mexico Must Become a Nation of Institutions and Laws, <i>Plutarco Elías Calles</i>	370
The Formation of the Single-Party State, <i>Carlos Fuentes</i>	375
The Rough-and-Tumble Career of Pedro Crespo, <i>Gilbert M. Joseph and Allen Wells</i>	377
A Convention in Zacapu, <i>Salvador Lemus Fernández</i>	387
The Agrarian Reform in La Laguna, <i>Fernando Benítez</i>	393
The Oil Expropriation, <i>Josephus Daniels</i>	399

VI *The Perils of Modernity* 403

They Gave Us the Land, <i>Juan Rulfo</i>	407
Mexico's Crisis, <i>Daniel Cosío Villegas</i>	412
Struggles of a Campesino Leader, <i>Rubén Jaramillo</i>	423
Art and Corruption, <i>David Alfaro Siqueiros</i>	433
The Two Faces of Acapulco during the Golden Age, <i>Andrew Sackett</i>	440
The Dark Deeds of "El Negro" Durazo, <i>José González G.</i>	448
The Sinking City, <i>Joel Simon</i>	455
Ciudad Nezahualcóyotl: Souls on the Run, <i>Roberto Vallarino</i>	467
Roma Exposes Mexico's Darkest Secret, <i>Marcela García</i>	476
Modesta Gómez, <i>Rosario Castellanos</i>	482
La Costa Chica and the Struggles of Mexico's "Third Root," <i>Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán</i>	490
Images of Afro-Mexican Mobilization on the Costa Chica in the 2010s, <i>Various Photographers</i>	494

VII *From the Ruins* 499

The Student Movement of 1968, <i>Elena Poniatowska</i>	501
El Santo's Strange Career, <i>Anne Rubenstein</i>	515
After the Earthquake, <i>Victims' Coordinating Council</i>	524
Letters to Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, <i>Anonymous</i>	534
Identity Hour, or What Photos Would You Take of the Endless City? (From a Guide to Mexico City), <i>Carlos Monsiváis</i>	540
The Political Manifesto of the COCEI of Juchitán, Oaxaca, <i>The COCEI</i>	546
Women of Juchitán, <i>Jeffrey W. Rubin</i>	550
EZLN Demands at the Dialogue Table, <i>Zapatista Army of National Liberation</i>	561

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A Tzotzil Chronicle of the Zapatista Uprising, *Marián Peres Tsu* 569
 Debtors' Revenge: The Barzón Movement's Struggle against Neoliberalism,
Heather Williams 583

VIII *The Border and Beyond* 595

The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, *Nicholas Trist, Luis Cuevas,
 Bernardo Couto, and Miguel Atristain* 599
 Plan of San Diego, *Anonymous* 604
 The "Wetback Invasion," *Timothy J. Henderson* 607
 The High Cost of Deportation, *Julia Preston* 616
 A Honduran Teenager's Journey across Borders, *Sonia Nazario* 627
 Two Poems about Immigrant Life, *Pat Mora and Gina Valdés* 645
 The Maquiladora Workers of Juárez Find Their Voice, *David Bacon* 648
Dompe Days, *Luis Alberto Urrea* 654
 Two Songs about Drug Smuggling, *Paulino Vargas and Chalino Sánchez* 662
 "We Are More American," *Enrique Valencia* 665

IX *From the Perfect Dictatorship to an Imperfect Democracy* 667

Mexicans Would Not Be Bought, Coerced, *Wayne A. Cornelius* 679
 Assessing NAFTA: Before and After, *Mark Weisbrot and Vicente Fox* 682
 Ayotzinapa: A Father's Testimony, *John Gibler* 687
 The Narco Who Died Twice, *Ioan Grillo* 694
 AMLO on Corruption, *Andrés Manuel López Obrador* 702
 The Promise and Peril of López Obrador, *Denise Dresser* 708
 Traditional Medicine in Modern Mexico and the Challenge of COVID-19,
Gabriela Soto Laveaga and the Nich Ixim Midwives Movement 718
 Should I Die Abroad, Bring Me Back to Mexico, *Jorge Ramos* 733

Suggestions for Further Reading 737
 Acknowledgment of Copyrights and Sources 747
 Index 757



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A Note on Style

In doing the translations for this volume we have attempted as much as possible to remain true to both the flavor and meaning of the original text. We have tried to choose English words that are as close as possible to the Spanish counterparts, though translation is an inexact science. In instances where it seemed essential to provide some further explanation, we have used brief and unobtrusive brackets whenever possible. At times, however, a brief end-note was in order. With respect to proper names, we have made a practice of rendering these as they appeared in the original text. Some names—for example, Moctezuma—have many different spellings, and several of those spellings appear in the pages to follow. We hope readers will bear with us.

Many of the selected texts have been substantially abridged, and for this we offer apologies to the authors. In these cases, the pages of the original from which quotations have been selected appear in the “Acknowledgment of Copyrights and Sources” section.





Map of Mexico.

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Introduction

Mexico has always exercised a tremendous hold on the imagination of outsiders. Over the centuries, visitors have marveled at its tremendous economic possibilities and been lured by its “exotic,” expressive cultures. Standing atop one of the great pyramids of the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlán (now Mexico City) in 1519, Bernal Díaz del Castillo, one of the lieutenants of the Spanish conqueror Hernán Cortés, was barely able to contain his awe at the tableau that spread out before him:

We were astounded at the great number of people and the quantities of merchandise, and at the orderliness . . . that prevailed, for we had never seen such a thing before. . . . Every kind of merchandise . . . had its fixed place . . . with dealers in gold, silver, and precious stones, feathers, cloaks, and embroidered goods, and male and female slaves to be sold in the market. . . . We saw pyramids and shrines in these cities that looked like gleaming white towers and castles: a marvelous sight to behold.¹

Three centuries later, a “scientific conquistador,” the German Alexander von Humboldt (hailed in his time as “the monarch of the sciences”), spent a year of intense investigation in Mexico, then published a book in 1810 that celebrated the virtually boundless economic potential of Mexico’s agricultural and mineral resources. Observing that there was not a single plant in the rest of the world that could not grow in its soil, Baron von Humboldt predicted a bright future for Mexico.² Almost two hundred years later, in the early 1990s, U.S. political and business leaders regaled the American public with latter-day images of a cornucopia of trade and investment that would be realized as soon as the United States ratified NAFTA (the North American Free Trade Agreement).

Mexico’s cultural complex—that is, both its aesthetic realm and its political culture—has riveted foreigners at least as much as its enticing landscapes and natural resources. Enlightenment philosophes and nineteenth-century liberal intellectuals were obsessed by the intriguing mixture of artistic achievement and bloodcurdling brutality—of “civilization and barbarism”—that they saw as the hallmark of Mexico’s pre-Columbian societies, most notably the Aztec empire. In the aftermath of Mexico’s epic revolution (1910–17),

norteamericanos, titillated (and unsettled) by the violent careers of telluric revolutionary chiefs like Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata and captivated by revolutionary artists like Diego Rivera, reencountered Mexico, celebrating the cultural and political triumphs of *La Revolución*. The “enormous vogue of things Mexican” among U.S. artists, intellectuals, and activists in the 1920s and 1930s, for example, played itself out on one level in a “discovery” of Mexico’s “timeless” and exotic popular culture. Rustic songs and dances, folk cuisine and handicrafts, the exuberant murals painted on the walls of public ministries and cantinas alike, “primitive” retablos, and the evocative woodcuts of Mexican revolutionary artist José Guadalupe Posada—all generated a powerful romantic appeal among waves of “revolutionary tourists” disaffected with the excesses of U.S. capitalist society and modernity itself.³ Significantly, the new Mexican revolutionary state did what it could to promote these desires, eager to perpetuate notions of *mexicanidad* (Mexican-ness) rooted in an “authentic” mestizo rural culture of which it was the legitimate custodian and beneficiary.

In the decades that followed, as postrevolutionary governments “institutionalized” the revolution and “modernized” the country under the aegis of an immovable party, the message that the nation’s leaders wished to convey to the world was that Mexico was now, all at once, cosmopolitan, folkloric, and safe. Thus, the “Amigo Country” was both on the cutting edge of modernization and laid back; capable of staging high-profile events like the Olympics and the World Cup but also impromptu dawn serenades by mariachis; a mecca simultaneously for high-powered investors and countercultural (and more recently “eco”) tourists seeking a road less traveled.⁴ At the turn of the new millennium, one multinational tourist promotion trumpeted the attractions of the “new, exclusive Explorian Resort in tropical Mexico.” Here tourists in the post–Indiana Jones mold could rise early to bask in nature’s secluded, early-morning splendors; ride motorbikes deep into the recesses of a Mayan jungle, spotting parrots and monkeys and unearthing ancient artifacts and treasures along the way; and then return in the afternoon to sample all the comforts, media, and excitements of a luxurious hotel and sports complex.⁵

In the world beyond the rhetoric of state builders and tourist promoters, however, modernity has been fraught with perils for Mexico. *The Mexico Reader* has assembled a wealth of materials that afford the reader an opportunity to reflect on the broader, uneven process whereby Mexico became “modern.” Read together, these selections call into question linear notions of modernization as an inexorable and overwhelming historical current. They show how Mexicans at all points on the social spectrum have both shaped and challenged the content, pace, and direction of modernization. In the process, the anthology unpacks the enduring images of Mexican political economy and culture that many foreigners nurture of Mexico—images that

are themselves an important dimension of Mexican history and in whose fashioning both Mexicans and outsiders have often colluded.

Still, such cooperation has been uneven, and there have been frequent misunderstandings and painful “discordant encounters.” Over thirty-five years ago, the longtime *New York Times* correspondent Alan Riding remarked in his influential book *Distant Neighbors* that no two countries that share a common border understand each other less than the United States and Mexico do⁶—an observation that eerily rings true as this essay is being written, decades after the onset of NAFTA, during the age of Donald Trump. At this unsettled juncture it is particularly important for this collection to provide a deeper understanding in the North of our neighbor south of the Rio Grande.

Any deeper understanding of Mexico must begin with an acknowledgment that, for all its historic economic potential and its much-publicized entry into an “integrated” North American economy in the mid-1990s, Mexico remains closer to its Third World past than to its supposedly inexorable First World destiny. A victim of periodic booms, disastrous meltdowns, fragile recoveries, and a global pandemic in recent decades, Mexico still has a per capita income of less than \$10,000 a year, and 55 million of its 130 million citizens live in poverty, according to the Mexican government’s own data. Mexico has become the United States’ largest trading partner (surpassing China and Canada late in 2018, in the midst of President Trump’s escalating trade wars). Mexico has produced fabulous fortunes in business, politics, oil, and the drug trade, with more billionaires in recent decades than any other country save the oil emirates. Still, until as recently as the late 2010s, many tens of thousands of Mexicans were driven to migrate illegally to the United States each year, owing to a dearth of economic opportunities in the countryside or the cities. Quite simply, most Mexicans have remained outside the periodic booms of recent decades while participating fully in the busts that have preceded and followed them. Moreover, despite the pronouncements by Baron von Humboldt and others regarding the country’s agricultural and mineral abundance and the rich cultural endowments of its people, it has always been thus.

These perpetual frustrations are partly explained by the country’s history, geography, and politics. Mexico has always presented formidable challenges to economic development and governance, in part owing to the tremendous diversity of its peoples, languages (even today there are still almost sixty indigenous languages spoken), and regions. No doubt the country’s notoriously difficult topography—particularly the existence of two rugged cordilleras that run from north to south, effectively cutting off the western and eastern portions of the country from the central corridor, while isolating many of the center’s fertile valleys from one another—has historically played an important role in the regionalization of the country. Even today in an age of globalization, the small farmer of Tamaulipas, who cultivates flat, irrigated fields of sorghum and speaks the mixed Spanish-English border patois, can

hardly recognize a fellow countryman in the highland campesino of Chiapas, who speaks a Maya-inflected version of *castellano*, if he speaks Spanish at all, and who tends a miserable plot of corn. In Mexico City, the teeming urban heart of Mexican civilization, high-rise buildings loom above colonial churches, which in turn overshadow the blackened ruins of the destroyed indigenous civilization. The city is home to the rich and powerful, but also to shantytown dwellers and street beggars. All of this makes Mexico difficult to grasp as an abstraction; it must be appreciated in its specificity. As the title of Lesley Byrd Simpson's classic history makes clear, there are indeed "many Mexicos"—and ruling them effectively has never been easy.⁷

The task of governing Mexico and unleashing its economic potential was made more formidable still by the lingering trauma of the Spanish conquest, and by a colonial legacy of exploitation, racism, and paternalistic authoritarian rule. It was further complicated by the extraordinary economic, political, and ideological power of the Roman Catholic Church, which has played dramatic, ambiguous, and often contradictory roles in the nation's history. And it was embittered by the fact that, since independence at least, Mexico's leadership has shown itself determined to doggedly pursue the chimera of "modernity." Generations of would-be reformers and social engineers—liberals, revolutionaries, and technocrats—have found themselves repeatedly frustrated by stubborn Mexican realities. It has seemed to them that each time they have had their nation poised to make its debut in the company of "developed," "First World" countries, they have been blindsided by some manifestation of what anthropologist Guillermo Bonfil Batalla has called "México profundo" (the old "deep Mexico").⁸ The indigenous rebellion of the Zapatista National Liberation Army in Chiapas, which followed hot on the heels of the signing of NAFTA in 1994, is only a relatively recent case in point. And if the modernizers' hopes have not been undone by recalcitrant internal forces, they have often been dealt the *golpe de gracia* by the perverse logic of the modern world economy itself, and Mexico's highly vulnerable, dependent status in it, particularly vis-à-vis the United States. Thus, in the 1980s, the oil-export boom evaporated, leaving only a mountain of debt; in the mid-1990s, the nation's overvalued peso collapsed immediately after NAFTA was signed, and countless millions of dollars of portfolio ("hot money") investment fled the country at the stroke of a keyboard. The post-9/11 economic downturn in the United States was particularly onerous for Mexico. Then, in 2008, the precipitous recession brought on by overleveraged U.S. financial institutions created economic havoc south of the border. More recently, Trump's aggressive "America First" agenda, epitomized by all manner of threats linked to immigration and his "Great Wall," have wrought havoc with the value of the Mexican peso. Indeed, there have been few periods in Mexico's national history that have not been characterized as times of "crisis." Of course, for those Mexicans who do not share the "developmentalist" vision of their leaders,

or whose families' agrarian livelihoods and mores have been disrupted by it, terms such as *crisis* (and *modernity* itself) take on a very different meaning.

While Mexico is certainly a unique and extraordinary country, it is also true that the multistranded examination of Mexican history, culture, and politics presented in this volume can shed a good deal of light on central problems facing nations in the global South as a whole. Specifically, Mexico provides a compelling case study for examining such nations' historical struggles to achieve effective modes of governance and sustainable economic growth. Although until recently many Americans often took political stability and economic growth for granted, throughout most of the global South—and certainly in Latin America—two hundred years after the achievement of formal independence there is still no tried-and-true formula for political stability and broad-based economic development. Why is this the case? Why, on virtually every economic and social indicator, are the Latin American nations (not to mention most of their African and Asian counterparts) so far behind the United States, which won its independence at roughly the same time? Why—despite the dazzling fortunes of a favored few—is the gap between North and South apparently widening, notwithstanding all the optimistic forecasts that were made at the onset of NAFTA and the market-driven “New World Order”? And, finally, what roles have the United States and other foreign powers played in the quest of countries such as Mexico to attain effective, representative governance and balanced economic development?

The themes explored by our contributors will provide grist for discussion and debate of these and many other questions. At the core of the volume lies an attempt to convey something of the multiple histories of Mexico's development as a nation—histories “from above,” “from below,” and in between; histories shaped by forces and agents inside and outside the country. Unlike much of the prevailing pedagogical literature on Mexico, *The Mexico Reader* seeks to show how these histories intersect, illuminating the tension between long-running processes of global economic expansion, nation-state formation, and the responses these larger trends have produced at the grass-roots level. In this sense, the volume will likely pose a challenge to many introductory texts on Mexico, since the linkages between the state's political-economic and cultural projects of transformation, on the one hand, and local equations of resistance, accommodation, negotiation, and popular empowerment, on the other, are at once central to the Mexican past and still not adequately understood.

Thus, this volume seeks to integrate political-economy and cultural approaches in an effort to understand the past and present of a complex society and tease out the manner in which the former has shaped the latter. While we strive to present a broad range of perspectives and eschew reductionist renditions of history, such as overwrought theories of “imperialism” or “dependency,” we also seek to avoid a “postmodern carnival of polyphony.”⁹

This anthology examines a country whose history is bound up with what Mexico's late Nobel laureate Octavio Paz famously described as "cycles of conquest."¹⁰ Not for nothing, then, do we take pains to examine the structures of power and privilege—caste and class, ethno-racial, gendered, and generational—that have undergirded Mexican society. Some of the readings focus on enduring forms of class exploitation; others suggest how gender ideologies interlock with hierarchies of class, race, and ethnicity, giving the lie to the kind of unitary notions of Mexican-ness that postrevolutionary state builders advanced throughout the twentieth century. The collection underscores that class oppression does not eliminate ethno-racial, gendered, or generational identities, though it may speak through them with important consequences for collective political action. The volume also demonstrates that although it is fashionable these days to bash Marxian theories of imperialism and dependency—and, to be sure, their simple correlation of "Third World" ills with First World domination often caricatures more than it explains—foreign intervention runs throughout the course of Mexican history and has been an unmistakable factor in the nation's poverty and internal conflicts.

Guided by these larger questions, goals, and assumptions, our criteria for selecting pieces for this anthology have been relatively straightforward. First, we have sought to evoke a variety of actors and environments, so that the patterned complexity of *muchos Méxicos* will emerge vividly over the centuries, in a manner that inflects the country's class, ethno-racial, gender, generational, regional, and ideological axes of difference. Second, we have put a premium on Mexican voices that are of critical importance but often inaccessible to English-speaking readers. Many of the selections, therefore, appear for the first time in translation. Third, we have made every effort to avoid readings that are arcane or overly technical, or require extensive previous knowledge of a given topic. Most of the pieces we have chosen were originally written for a general audience; each, we hope, will be successful in clarifying issues, piquing interest, and stimulating thought. Finally, the new edition has sought to introduce readers to new topics and approaches to Mexican history and affairs in recent decades, particularly a greater interest in ethnicity and race, gender and sexuality, immigration, health and medicine, narcoviolence, and the meaning of democracy. The introduction of new material has obliged us to "retire" some selections from the original edition and to pare down others. Most of the readings are relatively short, but we have included a final section offering suggestions for further reading for those who wish to delve more deeply.

The timing of this anthology's second edition, like the volume's initial appearance in 2002, is quite propitious. The last two decades have witnessed watershed elections (in 2000 and 2018) that have roughly coincided with the publication of *The Mexico Reader's* two editions. We have made an effort,

particularly in the new volume's last two sections—on the Mexico-U.S. border and the transition from a so-called perfect dictatorship to a besieged democracy, respectively—to take stock of these tumultuous decades that have critically reoriented Mexican society. The first edition followed closely upon the historic elections of July 2000, in which the virtual political monopoly of Mexico's ruling party, the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI)—long threatened by the growing assertiveness of nongovernmental organizations, indigenous rebels, opposition forces on the right and left, and a public weary of crisis and corruption—was definitively broken. Unfortunately, the years that followed have brought Mexico's nascent democracy to the breaking point, prompting a succession of right- and left-of-center parties (including, briefly, an allegedly new version of the PRI), and an array of movements in civil society to attempt to reshape or at least stabilize Mexico in the face of widening social inequality, burgeoning narcoviolence, and growing corruption and impunity. The year 2018 seemed to mark a defining moment, as Andrés Manuel López Obrador (better known by his acronym, AMLO), became Mexico's first leftist president in more than seven decades, since Lázaro Cárdenas's administration in the late 1930s. His renovating government appeared to represent the last wave of Latin America's reformist Pink Tide, which had significantly ebbed over the course of the preceding decade. Yet as this volume went into production amid the COVID pandemic, it remains to be seen whether AMLO's administration—still benefiting from the popularity of his resounding electoral victory and controlling both chambers of Congress—will mark a genuine break from the past or succumb to the same structural legacies and political-economic and conjunctural problems that plagued his more conservative predecessors.

Unfortunately, so much that we read and hear about Mexico these days comes to us in the heat of the moment—in polemical, sometimes xenophobic sound bites served up in a climate of fear about Mexico and much of the global South. These sound bites and images emanate from the mainstream press, Congress, Hollywood, partisan cable TV and talk radio, social media, and (last but not least in recent years) the White House. Typically they single out the activities of “illegal aliens,” or the epidemic of drugs, or border violence, vulnerability to terrorism, and homeland *insecurity*. Sometimes they belittlingly refer to Mexico as a “failed state,” or as a society that sends us its dregs—murderers, rapists, and “bad hombres.” Or they emphasize the loss of American jobs due to NAFTA and more recently proposed trade pacts. Of course, stripped of hype and hyperbole, most of these polemical images and sound bites gesture to real and threatening problems. But what we hope to accomplish in this volume is to embed these preoccupations in meaningful *context*: particularly in the historical context of unequal yet interdependent relations between Mexico and the United States, and in the structural inequalities and differences that have always divided Mexicans themselves.

In this manner we hope to introduce a new generation of North Americans to their southern neighbor in a way that will make them at once more sympathetic toward Mexico's historical problems and more appreciative of its cultural richness and transformative potential.

The book contains nine parts. Part I examines the theme of *mexicanidad*. It inquires into the reasons behind the national obsession with "Mexican-ness" and chronicles the attempts by generations of thinkers and politicians to celebrate or deconstruct the national essence, to find some sort of Mexican archetype. While consensus on the issue is obviously impossible, more certain is the construction or politicization of "national character" by the postrevolutionary state and its successors to legitimize their rule. Parts II through V examine Mexico's history from pre-Columbian times through the consolidation of the Mexican revolution at the conclusion of the administration of President Lázaro Cárdenas in 1940. The country's historical evolution has profoundly influenced present-day Mexico and will powerfully shape the nation's prospects in the twenty-first century. These sections are designed to be of interest in themselves, but they also foreground the themes we take up in parts VI through IX, which are almost entirely dedicated to Mexico since 1940. These final sections, which focus on the contradictions and costs of postrevolutionary modernization, the rise of civil society (particularly since 1968), and the multiple challenges that Mexico's fledgling democracy has faced since the once-hegemonic Institutional Revolutionary Party was defeated at the ballot box in 2000, are designed to resonate with one another. They are also intended to provoke discussion about the complicated relations between a new Mexico—and a new United States—whose citizens, as anthropologist Arjun Appadurai aptly put it, are no longer as "tightly territorialized [and] spatially bounded," and where such fundamental categories as "foreign" and "domestic" become increasingly blurred.¹¹

Notes

1. Bernal Díaz del Castillo, *The Conquest of New Spain*, translated by J. M. Cohen (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1963), 232–35. More of Díaz del Castillo's classic eyewitness account appears in part III of this volume.
2. José Miranda, *Humboldt y México* (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1962).
3. Helen Delpar, *The Enormous Vogue of Things Mexican: Cultural Relations between the United States and Mexico, 1920–1935* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1992).
4. Gilbert M. Joseph, Anne Rubenstein, and Eric Zolov, eds., *Fragments of a Golden Age: The Politics of Culture in Mexico since 1940* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001); see especially the editors' introduction, "Assembling the Fragments: Writing a Cultural History of Mexico since 1940," 3–22, and the essay by Zolov, "Discovering a Land 'Mysterious and Obvious': The Renarrativizing of Postrevolutionary Mexico," 234–72.
5. This promotion was aired frequently on New York radio stations in 2000.

6. Alan Riding, *Distant Neighbors: A Portrait of the Mexicans* (New York: Vintage Books, 1986), ix–xi.
7. Lesley Byrd Simpson, *Many Mexicos*, 4th ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974).
8. Guillermo Bonfils Batalla, *México Profundo: Reclaiming a Civilization*, trans. Philip Dennis (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996). A selection from *México Profundo* appears in part I of this volume.
9. Orin Starn, Carlos Iván Degregori, and Robin Kirk, eds., *The Peru Reader: History, Culture, Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), 9.
10. Octavio Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude and Other Writings*, trans. Lysander Kemp, Yara Milos, and Rachael Phillips Belash (New York: Grove, 1985). A selection from *The Labyrinth of Solitude* appears in part I of this volume.
11. Arjun Appadurai, “Global Ethnoscapes: Notes and Queries for a Transnational Anthropology,” in *Recapturing Anthropology: Working in the Present* (Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research, 1991), 191; see also Gilbert M. Joseph, “Close Encounters: Towards a New Cultural History of U.S.–Latin American Relations,” in *Close Encounters of Empire: Writing the Cultural History of U.S.–Latin American Relations*, ed. Gilbert M. Joseph, Catherine C. LeGrand, and Ricardo D. Salvadore (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), 3–4.

