

HISTORY IN THE MEXICAN SOCIETY OF TODAY

The presence of the past is of prime importance in today's Mexican society. According to José Fuentes Mares, among the "peoples of the world the Mexican is the one who lives history the most". With regard to the unsatisfactory relations between Mexico and North America, the journalist Alan Riding asks himself: "How can a people who relish the past to the point of intoxication understand another that looks constantly to the future?" In the Republic of Mexico, according to him, "the entire past of the country throws a dense shadow over the present". Conforming to a universal custom, every country divides its present past into four groups (survival, residues, memories and history), but in few nations are the four groups as copious as in this one. Although Mexico is rapidly shedding many old customs and is selling residual objects to foreign collectors on the sly, its historical treasure is still enormous, perhaps the largest in the world.

The survivals are diminishing quickly. What the religious orders of New Spain or modern pedagogues could not do is being accomplished by the mass media of communication. In any case, it is still

Translated by Jeanne Ferguson

possible to peek into the pre-Columbian epoch of Mexico through the skylight of ethnography; there are tribes in the north and southeast that still live according to techniques, community life and cultural values of remote times, long before the arrival of the Spanish adventurers of Hernando Cortés. Yet, many country people stubbornly follow the teaching of the *padres* of the 16th and 17th centuries and thus enable us to know our baroque period through a simple scrutiny of how they behave today. Some thousands of Mexicans resist Westernization, and some millions resist modernity.

Whatever is not already wrongfully used remains in a material residual form. Ancient pottery and old papers; in spite of the assiduity with which pre-Columbian and colonial buildings have been destroyed and documents lost in recent years, the cultural patrimony or that connected with remains—witnesses of earlier stages of Mexican life—continue to be the paradise of hundreds of archaeologists (for the most part from the United States), dozens of art historians (some of them European) and thousands of archivists and scholars from here and abroad. In the last thirty years there has been rapid progress in the improvement in opening tombs, the visualization of man-made scars in the earth, the defense and restoration of the major temples of Teotihuacan, Tula and Tenochtitlan, the restoration of Mayan architecture, the repristination of the grandiose buildings of the Colonial era, the establishment of museums such as that of Chapultepec and the serious and splendid availability of the General Archives of the nation. With all of this, as is repeatedly said, much is lacking in what concerns the excavation of archaeological sites, libraries and archives, especially in the provinces. Unfortunately, archaeology, the maintaining of archives and libraries, is expensive, a very difficult function for a country so rich in remains and so poor economically.

However, urgent operations are necessary to redeem memories or oral tradition. In this field the Republic of Mexico is discreetly rich because of mass media of transmission. All in all, for being rich while in the process of becoming impoverished, the Mexican still possesses a good amount of past events learned by heart, a wealth that continues to be supplied by the Church, the State and the old men from many places. The Church, through the imagery of Christ, the Virgin and the just, by means of baroque facades and

retables, with the aid of celebrations of the mass and giving of the sacraments, through sermons and spiritual exercises, promotes, in vast sectors of the population, the memory of the origin and development of the Christian way of life.

For more than a century the national government, like the Church, has been occupied in instilling in the people the origin and progress of the Mexican nation in order to maintain in the popular memory the recollection of the pre-Columbian paradise, the purgatory of the Colony, the martyrs of independence, the saints of liberalism, the invasions of *gringos* and *franchutes* and the giants of the Mexican Revolution. This is done by means of paintings on the walls of public buildings, bronzes along the avenues and in the parks, place names, patriotic dates, parades and speeches on February 24, March 21, May 5, September 16 and November 20. Through the Church, the government and custom, each Mexican goes throughout the world well provisioned with sad memories.

In homes, especially those in villages and in the country, an old man still rocks back and forth as he recalls the crimes that happened in the family or the community. We Mexicans, and the Jews, enjoy remembering massacres and persecutions and the few happy events related by the old people. In this we differ from many countries that do not listen to the *pachichi*, or oral biographies. In rural Mexico, the age of the recollections gives them prestige. Here those who live to recall yesterday are not thought ill of as they are in other countries. Through their "old folks", and without the aid of historians, country people accumulate events from the past of the family and the land that are almost always painful. Even recently, when Mexico was predominantly illiterate, there was a vigorous memory that especially shed light on the past of the family; secondly, that of the Church, and last, that of the nation. Today, although diminished, recollected history still exists; it complies with the Biblical precept: "Remember the days of old".

Written history or historiography is the fourth way in which Mexico takes possession of its past in a form that is each time more vast. The enormous wealth of monumental and documentary vestiges and spontaneous and cultivated recollections serve as a foundation for a written production that is continually richer and runs in three currents: popular, political and academic. As perhaps happens in few countries, in this one the three ways of historicizing

to which Miguel de Cervantes, Frederick Nietzsche and Ernest Bernheim refer continue to live and thrive.

ANECDOTAL OR NARRATIVE HISTORY

All types of history—monumental, pragmatic, scientific or pedantic—are practiced in today's Mexico with passion, but modern historiographers have a tendency to ignore the most popular of them, the anecdotal tale. In *Veinticinco años de investigación histórica en México* most of the work of today's *narradores* is omitted. Also forgotten are almost all the contributors to the volume of 750 pages that in 1969 analyzed the *Investigaciones contemporáneas sobre historia de México*, to which only a section on micro-history is dedicated. Shortly afterward, in *Invitación a la microhistoria*, I listed a thousand volumes of domestic or popular history, or microhistory, published from 1871 to 1970, but the majority of works of the narrative type are not on my list, and those that are do not merit the space given them. The brilliant study of Miguel León Portilla on the latest "tendencies in historical investigations" in this country, published in 1978, alludes to the survival of "focuses and methods that are little evolved", an allusion that allows the nullification of the large majority of historians engaged in copying trivialities and gossip. Alvaro Matute, in his excellent summary of "Contemporary Mexican Historiography" ignores them; in exchange, José María Muriá mentions some of these forgotten men in "*Problemas del historiador de provincia*".

There is no doubt that it is a question of a very old way of writing history, related to simple recollection. It appears, without major pragmatic propositions, however, with *Cartas de Relación* by Hernán Cortés and with the *Historia de la conquista de Nueva España* by Bernal Díaz de Castillo. Both these authors were soldiers of the 16th century who were fond of reading picaresque tales. It was ostracized through the decision of civil and ecclesiastical authorities of three centuries of the colonial era who did not find the reading of romances and stories of secular life orthodox. Hagiography exiled history as a pastime. It could only circulate disguised as a reformer of customs in colonial times. With the triumph of the war of independence, in the last century, it again came to the

surface. It was a type of literature widely diffused by the periodical press. United with the two most prestigious genres in the modern world, as a story in periodicals and as historical romance describing the weak side of distinguished personalities, it continued beyond the 19th century. The violent stage of the revolution produced abundant historical narratives, the most outstanding those of Martín Luis Guzmán and General Urquiza. It reappeared in the agrarian and Indian stages of the revolution. Today is not its best period. The “establishment” and the “university” like to keep control of history and do not encourage popular history.

The history that the people appreciate, the legitimate daughter of memory and gossip; the one by people who are not historians but in many cases doctors, lawyers, priests, journalists and poets; the recollection that “originates in the heart and instinct”; that which only seeks to recount what has happened, aspiring to reproduce painful episodes from the past, even if written in large quantity and very seldom with authority and benefit. Today it is mainly produced in the provinces, although some Mexican publications of large circulation repeat it week after week (*Impacto*) or less often (*Contenido*). It is not a moribund species, though scorned by the cultured and powerful. No one knows how many write and read narrative historiography in present-day Mexico.

One theme aided by purely narrative history is the private activity and weaknesses of strong public men in the national past, but it is not as plentiful as in the countries of the *primer mundo*. Here, neither the government nor the people permit the treatment of humans as demigods. Here, there is no liberty for the gluttony for slander. However, the subject of the great battles of the insurgent movement, the Reform and the Revolution has been taken away from good narrators of national episodes by boring and moralizing *maestros*. Since the theme of popular life has not been made official or pigeon-holed, Mexican historians of a narrative bent write freely, if not in the best of all possible words, the tragic stories of popular heroes (Heraclio Bernal, Chucho el Roto, Pancho Villa) and stories of the unpleasant times in towns such as Dolores, Zinapécuaro, Obregón, Opodepe, Zamora, Cotija, Metepec, Santa Clara, Maíz, Acapulco, Lagos and San José de Gracia.

Non-moralizing and non-pedantic history continues to produce books. We may almost say with certainty that in the last fifteen

years the number of Mexican histories of sadistic entertainment is more than a thousand. It is said, without sufficient discrimination, that this literature has lost the gift of resurrecting things that are dead. In many cases, it is only a series of crude testimonials; in others, a shapeless mass of occurrences, and in some cases, imaginary history with no documented basis. The dilettantism of many narrators leads them away from the course that leads to the reality of the past. Many of them live in small cities or towns and so, in some cases, do not have *ad hoc* libraries and archives at their disposal. They have little contact with each other, and when they do meet, it is mainly to bicker. They use only their spare time for research, and many aspire to write like political commentators or social scientists; the worst is that they often succeed. The narrative type of history that is produced today in Mexico is becoming poor in truth and art. Trustworthy works and those that are pleasing to read are in the minority. It is a matter of a way to write history that is in crisis, if not already obsolete. None of its present practitioners is comparable to Bernal Díaz or Luis Gonzáles Obregón, but several are able to give them new life.

The Cinderella of the daughters of Clio sees better times to come. There are already well-formed and informed people; professionals of history who do not avoid the dust of archives and libraries and who know and want to collect oral testimony. If the old chronicles continue to gain more prestige, it does not mean that the new ones are looked down on. José Joaquín Blanco has just finished re-evaluating historical works with narrative aims. Some savants have said that they prefer those “curiosity shops” to the historiography imposed by the dominating class.

OFFICIAL OR MONUMENTAL HISTORY

Narrative history produces a mild scorn in our historians with a university formation, but that originating from the official mentality is viewed with intense dislike. Enrique Florescano, in *El poder y la lucha por el poder en la historiografía mexicana*, strikes out against the historical species that has for many centuries enslaved the inhabitants of these latitudes; he points out the dangers of a mythology serving the governing class. Miguel León Portilla un-

willingly refers to “officialism” in history that is renewed every six years “with new heroes and the intentional ignoring of what is considered at the margins of the political evolution of the country”. Edmundo O’Gorman writes, “the *raison d’être*—no less!— . . .of the official version [of the country’s history] is not the search for truth. . . but the obtaining of [certain] sociopolitical objectives”.

The evil goes far back. The reigning historiography in the Colonial era looked to past actions for advantages for the present and the future. The missionary chroniclers were capable of offering lies about the past if in that way they could edify souls. The edifying purpose in history dominated the desire to tell the truth and only the truth. With Independence, the historiography of power changed in content if not for a better objective. Written history left off serving the Cross and began to serve the Mexican flag through two versions of history. In the schools of the liberal party was imposed the Hispanophobe and Republican version; in conservative schools, the Hispanophile and Monarchist version. The triumph of the liberals helped the diffusion of the paranoid image, full of enemies of the country. The policy of Don Porfirio Díaz was to conciliate the two versions, but he did not liberate history from pragmatic-nationalist obligations. In its first stage, the Revolution joined them to the anti-Spanish image tinged with Yankee-phobia, indigenism and Spanish-Americanism. In 1959 the other ways of viewing the life of the country were abolished. Free and obligatory textbooks initially claimed to rouse civic virtues through an epic, nationalistic, indigenist, liberal, xenophobe and revolutionary version of the future of Mexico. Today they are less rude in the attempt to make patriots and tranquil citizens, but they do not abjure the model.

Written history intended for elementary, secondary and preparatory education is today a history whose basic aims are to make citizens with national fervor. With nationalist and legitimist ends, present official history, not without finesse, exalts some political personalities and reviles others. It is a matter of a good job of the Manichean type. Most of our historico-didactic books are glorifications of good and brave angels who passed their lives in animated dispute with the angels of darkness who were identified by their contemporaries as *gachupines*, *encomenderos*, realists, conservatives, tyrants and land holders. In this national legend that retrieves

from the discussion of the Aztec paradise the Herculean Indian Cuauhtémoc against the light-weight *gachupín* Hernando Cortés; the meek Tata Vasco against the *encomenderos*; the good-natured rebels in the role as fathers of their country against the realistic cruelties that left no puppet with its head; the impassive Benito Juárez against the conservatives and the avid French; the apostle of democracy against the tyrant Porfirio Díaz; the peasants Emiliano and Lázaro using pitchforks and knives against the estate owners. Like the great majority of official histories, ours tends to be hagiographic and mythical; like few, its memories are of painful events, of things consumed by passion.

Official history transforms into myth the great moments of the past, just as history read for entertainment is in short episodes, especially if it is gory. It is also narrative but now without edifying additions and pious falsehoods. It imposes an erroneous idea of the country's development on young minds with the pretext that it is useful to form citizens who would defend their nation, as well as to obtain national unity. This history is a discourse that fits the condemnation of Paul Valéry as a ring fits a finger. Our reverential history is the most dangerous product that has been produced by the chemistry of the Mexican intellect. Like everything else, there are exceptions, isolated figures, histories with didactic intent that reduce to the minimum the epic and the false. On the other hand, in recent years a veneer of scientificity—but only a veneer—has been applied to the history taught in government primary and secondary schools. It has not been able to avoid the custom of encountering heroes and villains. The pedagogues who remake national life through biographies of distinguished heroes, governors and scoundrels, do not take the trouble to go to original sources nor even to second-hand facts, with science and conscience. They limit themselves to obtaining their statements from earlier works that are also deceitful. No one outside the teaching brotherhood controls their quality. The State takes on the responsibility of distributing them in the governmental schools of the country; it declares the use of such texts obligatory and condemns those who disapprove or dare criticize them.

To make bad things worse, the pernicious mythical and bloody history has the greatest circulation. Official mythology is imposed as the only one in thousands of schools which 15 million children

and adolescents attend. The anti-official, especially the conservative version, cunningly penetrates the student bodies of the great majority of private schools, which are very numerous. Works turning their backs on them by concealing the reality of the past are those that boast of the largest reading public; they are the most read because of their nature of official or anti-official texts.

PEDANTIC OR SCIENTIFIC HISTORY

Today in Mexico, the least read of historical production is the scientific, which has been cultivated for forty years. It had precursors (Manuel Orozco y Berra, Justo Sierra, Joaquín García Icazbalceta, Francisco Bulnes and Jesús Galindo), but the great development of history as a social science occurred in the second third of this century, thanks to the institute for the formation of researchers of the College of Mexico, established in 1941 by Silvio Zavala and a select group of Spanish exiles; the School of History and the Institute for Historical Research of Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, in which the leading figure was Edmundo O'Gorman; the conferences of historians promoted by Don Antonio Pompa y Pompa; the edition of the great theorists of historiography (Dilthey, Marx, Collingwood, Croce and Ranke) for the Foundation for Economic Culture; the seminary on history of the ideas of Dr. José Gaos, the *Revista de Historia de América*, the Institut Nacional de Antropología y Historia; the Institute of Esthetic Investigation; the French Institute for Latin America; and other institutions appearing between 1935 and 1950.

In the following fifteen years (1951-1965) occurred a multiplication of schools devoted to the formation of historians, institutions engaged in research into the past having exclusive dedication, editors willing to publish history texts that were difficult to read, publications in charge of diffusing the fruits of serious monographic investigations, conferences for discussing the profits and doubts of the historians. However, all that was nothing compared to the governmental support gained in the fifteen years between 1966 and 1981, and the support today has weight in the crisis. Today a degree in history may be obtained in six universities in Mexico City and fifteen in the provinces (Colima, Guanajuato, Guerrero,

Jalisco, México, Michoacán, Nuevo León, Tlaxcala and Veracruz). At present twenty teaching colleges give degrees in pedagogy specializing in history. On the other hand, very small groups, with a tendency to grow, have registered for Masters' degrees and doctorates in history that are given by UNAM, the Ibero-Americana University, the Colleges of Mexico, Michoacán and Bajío, the José María Luis Mora Institute and the University of Puebla. Also large is the number of institutions in which people must dedicate all their time to the study of social science. The same is true for the centers of historical studies of the aforementioned colleges, FILA, Condumex, the Departamento de investigaciones historicas of the INAH, the institutes of anthropology, sociology, esthetics and history of UNAM, the seminary of the Nahuatl Culture, the Center for Mayan Studies and half a dozen provincial academies.

The large majority of professional and scientific historians live in the metropolis. Recent propaganda in favor of decentralization returned very few to the provinces. Those that are most noted today are the ones of the older neo-scientific generation, those born between 1903 and 1918. In any case, those of the following generation are more numerous and those born between 1934 and 1950 are even more so. It would not be pertinent to give a list here of the thousands of historians who have investigated Mexico's past from 1966 in this country. Almost all appear in the bi-monthly lists of the higher institutes of teaching as professors or full-time researchers, even though very few have used the allotted time of forty hours a week for their scientific investigations. Those who complain of a lack of time are alluding to the slowness of transportation in the capital, to the hours when there are demonstrations for better working conditions, to courses and conferences, reading, counselling young people, meetings to resolve everything democratically, congresses and round tables, gossip and the indignation it produces; neurosis and the many hours required for psychoanalysis; academic-administrative duties and envies that are aroused; orders from mediocre superiors who want to reduce their subordinates to the condition of assistants; search for power and glory and other hindrances and time-wasters.

As is well known, academic historians have access to primary sources and footnotes, but until recently they could not give free rein to their interests because the chief suppliers of footnotes,

repositories of old documents, were the exclusive property of thieves, pickpockets, moths and paper manufacturers. Very few were the archivists who profited by redeeming and making accessible documents for quotation-hungry historians. The efficiency of the network of archives and helpful libraries for historical investigation has begun to be a reality during the last fifteen years. The heuristic stage of historical investigation is just ceasing to be the Via Crucis that it was. Due to the improvement in archaeological sites, museums, archives and libraries the themes of the scholars have become quite diversified.

Scientific historiography of recent years explores monographically each of the canonical periods of Mexican history. There are certain pre-Columbian themes that are much in favor: the first population of the land, cycles, the great constructions and urbanism of the Teotihuacans, Toltecs, Mayas and other peoples of Middle America, the social and political organization of the valleys of the Altaplano and the plateaus of the Southeast, the documents or codices of Aztecs, Mixtecs and others, calendars, human sacrifices, war, world views and art. In the study of the Colonial era certain themes stand out: economic, social and juridical institutions, the demographic catastrophe of the 16th century, the abuses of the *encomenderos*, the landowners of the 17th century, the agrarian and mining enterprises, the extensive and crude mining of the 18th century, trans-Atlantic and trans-Pacific commerce, taxes, the chroniclers of the first two centuries of colonization, the thinkers of the last century, neo-Hispanic literature, and *Tequitqui*, Baroque and neo-Classic styles. The workers of independent Mexico have not really been able to escape from these earlier themes; they are obedient to the tastes of court history, insist on political hagiography, make abundant use of bloody scenes and commemorate violent episodes, but when patriotic duties permit, they set themselves to investigating the economic, social and cultural topics of the moment.

Contemporary ideas give preference to social and economic topics. Histories of ideas, literature and art are pursued. Because of where the people engaged in research live, events in or near the capital are more easily studied, and the provinces are set aside. The episodic is on the rise. Constructions are looked for rather than the prowess of heroes. For professional reasons, panoramic

themes are avoided. The recovery of the whole is left in the hands of teams, as is seen in the *Historia general de México* by the professors of the College of Mexico and in the ten-volume *Historia de México* published by Salvat. Today the monograph reigns. Even books on the entirety of Mexico are collections of monographs.

Specialization, saying much about little, is in vogue. There are very few people capable of establishing the necessary connections between the various customs and stages of the country and of these with the world.

On the other hand, a scientific history is inconceivable without a compact theoretical stamp. At present the principal agencies providing this stamp are Marxism, positivism and historicism. The materialist interpretation of history has had a great effect on much of the content and many of the methods of Mexican history during the last decade or so. Some universities have imposed it as the exclusive interpretation of the history of humanity and the nation. The names of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Gramsci go from author to author. They coincide with the Mexican national tendency to study the macabre and criminal aspects of history. There is an abundance of those who are entirely faithful to Marx and his official commentators. In any case, they are more and more eclectic, those who take up only some categories and terms of Marx, those who make use of that philosophy of history and of other, or others. These, contrary to those of strict orthodoxy, are inclined to the pluralist explanation. Those really responsible for rampant monographism are of the following school.

The neopositivist "ism" devoted to the German Ranke, the French Bloch, Fevbre and Braudel and the English Carr, acknowledges the leadership of Silvio Zavala, the dispassionate founder of the Centro de Estudios Históricos de El Colegio de México (The Center for Historical Studies of the College of Mexico). In recent years, some neopositivists, whose inclination toward economic history is beyond doubt, have been drawn toward quantitative techniques. Economic history is tending toward econometrics, something like what is happening with demographic history. Also clear among positivists is the preference for durability and structures, even if these leanings are in opposition to those of the monographic work that is another of its preferences. Positivists believe that the illumination of many small portions of our past

must precede entire works of a general history of the country.

The devotees of Dilthey, Ortega y Gasset, Croce, Collingwood and Heidegger, distinguished historians such as José Gaos, Ramón Iglesia, Edmundo O' Gorman and various followers of that trio do not at all believe that excessive specialization, the unrestrained production of monographs, would lead to a definitive general history of Mexico. Our historicists are not fearful of premature syntheses, but neither have they made them. They show a proclivity for the history of ideas, and in some moments of polemics, which are not few, they have arrived at the following affirmation: all history is the history of ideas. For their part, the idealists do not believe in infallible historical knowledge, although not all accept the thesis that "history is an eminently inexact knowledge". The idealist attitude has been the seedbed of unorthodox schools, which are also called eclectic.

From 1966 until today, the three orthodox schools and various unorthodox schools have produced spates of monographs in the form of volumes or as part of specialized publications. The yearbook of the *Bibliografía Histórica Mexicana* of 1979, the work of Luis Muro, lists 1,867 publications on history, certainly some from another year and of a historiographic type, that is, other than scientific. I am sure that no less than 10,000 books and articles of academic history on a Mexican theme have been published in the last fifteen years. Even though fulltime historians do not fill up the time allowed for their investigations and writing, there are more investigators every day, the crop of books and articles of a scientific nature on the national past increases rapidly, both within and outside Mexico. We cannot disregard the fact that a high percentage of the production comes from abroad nor that history written about us from the exterior is diffused in Mexico along with that of national creation through Mexican editorials and journals. The historical production both here and abroad is usually printed by the editorial houses of Caballito, Casa Chata, Colegio de México, Dian, ERA, Fondo de Cultura Económica, Grujalbo, IMS, INAH, INI, Jus, Joaquín Mortiz, Nueva Imagen, Porrúa, Siglo Veintiuno, SEP, UNAM and others. The thousand scientists who write abundantly about Mexico's past and very little about that of other countries interchange their knowledge through printed matter, especially in academic meetings, but they remain unknown by and

History in the Mexican Society of Today

ignorant of the layman. Perhaps some believe in the aristocracy of their science, in the necessary abstention from casting pearls outside the circle of the elite, and sometimes historical knowledge is not appropriate for the majority. Most concur that knowledge of the past is of interest to everyone and that it should be communicated to the whole world, but almost no one is concerned with the use of the normal language of the common man of today. There is no lack of those who deliberately obscure the subjects with jargon that only initiates understand, but even those who do not use neologisms and pedantry rarely write as the people speak and do not dare take advantage of the opportunities for communication offered by cinema and television. The dread of a vulgar tone postpones the conquest of the man on the street, leaves the people without a liberating knowledge of history and contributes very little to the formation of the historical conscience of the great majority.

Luis González
(Mexico)