

SYNTHESIZING THE MEXICAN EXPERIENCE

- THE COURSE OF MEXICAN HISTORY*. By MICHAEL C. MEYER and WILLIAM L. SHERMAN. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979. Pp. 696. \$25.00.)
- A HISTORY OF MEXICO: FROM PRE-COLUMBIA TO PRESENT*. By SAMUEL H. MAYO. (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1978. Pp. 454. \$9.95.)
- A CONCISE HISTORY OF MEXICO: FROM HIDALGO TO CARDENAS, 1805–1940*. By JAN BAZANT. (New York, Cambridge, London, and Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1977. Pp. 222. \$14.95/\$4.95.)

Life in colonial Mexico was not a scene of unrelieved tragedy. Visitors to Mexico City were especially taken by beautiful mulatto women wearing expensive silks and gems; as for their admirers' offensive breath, that could be tamed by chewing licorice or cloves. In the nineteenth century, as Mexico slowly departed from the colonial past, nascent modernization appeared in a variety of forms: electric tramway hearses replaced horse and carriage; a well-defined red-light zone was created and women of pleasure were no longer able to transact business in front of the main cathedral. The "peace, order and progress" of Porfirio Diaz' post-1880 Mexico moved government officials to claim, not without some exaggeration, "that a blond woman in a short skirt could walk unmolested from the United States to the Guatemalan border" (pp. 434–35). Then came the Revolution of 1910: women were so active in smuggling ammunition across the border that the U.S. Customs Bureau was forced to hire large numbers of female agents to search the undergarments of lady suspects. In the 1930s the Revolution reached a constructive stage, and organized labor's hero, Vicente Lombardo Toledano, an inordinately egotistical man, was dubbed by the press the "Yo-yo Champion." It is this attention to the detail of the daily life of the nation that makes reading the comprehensive work by Michael Meyer and William Sherman an informative experience.

The appearance of *The Course of Mexican History* is a notable historiographical event, suggesting that the discipline has finally matured. This book will very likely become a *Mexicanista* Bible—graduate students to carry it at all times above the belt; mere sophomores to approach it with trepidation and awe. The subject matter is inclusive. Chronologically, the narrative runs from Mexico's earliest mammoth-hunters to the *granadero* headhunters of today's Mexico, and covers political, social, economic, and cultural history, including population trends, lifestyles, and the role of women. Unlike the blatantly Hispanist text of Lesley Byrd Simpson, or the more traditional studies by Henry Bamford Parkes and Charles Cumberland,¹ Meyer and Sherman have devoted much space and attention to the history of pre-Columbian societies (giving ancient Mexico more consideration than other survey histories). Equally significant has been the authors' achievement in incorporating a substantial body of insightful new schol-

arship, especially the books, articles, and theses of a generation of younger Mexican and American scholars working in the late 1960s and 1970s.²

As for aesthetics, the prose is clear, there is a constant adherence to proper scholarly form, and the style is consistent from the earlier chapters authored by Sherman to those on nineteenth- and twentieth-century Mexico written by Meyer. In addition, the work is profusely illustrated with paintings, photographs, maps, and charts. As an additional aid, each chapter is accompanied by a list of recommended studies in English, and there is a useful bibliography at the end of the text for those who read Spanish.

Assessment of any book turns on a variety of issues—the questions that guide the author's research, the logical requirements of historical thinking, objectivity and bias, and organization to name a few. For purposes of internal analysis, this writer will divide the forty-four chapters and ten parts of *The Course of Mexican History* into three chronological sections: pre-Columbian, colonial, and modern (since 1824). What is right about the book in its entirety is its balance, the authors' willingness to entertain alternative hypotheses, the examination of much relevant and available evidence, and the book's readability. It is solid narrative and descriptive history, most suitable for college students and general readers.

But no book can be all things to all people, and what it is not for the specialist can best be illustrated by looking at the ancient Mexico section, that part which is easily the weakest due to a lack of historical interpretation. As indicated before, the authors' treatment of Indian Mexico is the best yet to appear in a survey history; but the best to date is not good enough. The major problem appears to be their conservatism and caution, a trait which makes for excellent objective history, but which leaves the inquisitive reader with few interpretations, little analysis, and an inadequate appreciation of the developmental nature and continuity of Indian history. Archaeologists and anthropologists have not skirted the important interpretative issues, and historians, no matter how uncomfortable they are in the company of people who would rather spread sherds than eat dinner, should not write the history of ancient Mexico as if the only available evidence were a few physical artifacts scattered over several thousands of years of history.

Many important matters have been overlooked. For example, what were the causes of the decline of megafauna around 7000 B.C.? Certainly the environmental and ecological explanations would be of interest to today's student reader. Again, is not the authors' description of paleolithic man as a great hunter somewhat misleading? Archaeologist R. S. MacNeish suggests that the killing of a mammoth in central Mexico was an extremely rare event; that paleolithic peoples were more daring plant gatherers than elephant hunters. Then there is the issue of the invention of agriculture in Mexico (not to mention the specific question of the nature and extent of technology and intensive agriculture at Teotihuacán), and the many differences one notes when comparing the Mexican experience with Eurasia. Apart from a lack of domesticated animals in America, how does one account for the differences in crops, modes of production, and

length of process? What about the origin of the holy towns, centers, and cities; and what is the relationship of the city to the state, the city-state to the empire? Were there cultural links between Mexico and the Old World; what is the diffusionist/nondiffusionist controversy? What about the relationship of myth to history; can Freud's *Totem and Taboo* shed some light on the meaning of the Topiltzin-Quetzalcóatl legend or the story of the birth of Huitzilopochtli? Even the obligatory discussion of Aztec sacrificial practices makes no mention of population pressure theory and the scholarly debate currently raging inside and outside the New School of Social Research.³

The Indian history section can also be faulted for its failure to develop an adequate sense of historical continuity. The idea of Mesoamerican civilization as the product of cultural development and evolution is not a new one,⁴ but it is missing from the Meyer and Sherman book. One specific example should suffice. Like many historical works, this one contains the holocaust theory of the decline and fall of classic Maya culture. According to this view, post-classic Maya art and culture reflects a lowering of standards, the result of the New World holocaust of A.D. 750–900. At least two competent scholars would dispute this view. According to Jeremy Sabloff and William Rathje,⁵ the traditional holocaust view is an elitist perspective that looks at history from the point of view of Maya priests, rather than Yucatán farmers and Putun merchants. These men argue that classical Maya civilization did not fall, but instead underwent a transformation in which seafaring merchants with utilitarian values replaced priestly elites with theocratic and aesthetic values. Although a decline of Maya urban culture occurred in the Petén, the Yucatán witnessed an increase in productivity and a rise in the level of living for the average peasant. In other words, the Mayas have a continuous and complex history from pre-classic times to A.D. 1450.

As for the conquest, the authors relate events derived from both Indian and non-Indian sources. By so doing they demonstrate a keen awareness of conflicting testimony, especially for the massacre at the fiesta to Toxcatl, the death of Montezuma, and the latter's leadership qualities. The biographical sketch of Cortés has been made more interesting with the inclusion of an historiographical outline of Cortés' image in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Mexico. Unfortunately, until there appears a study on the men of Cortés akin to James Lockhart's study of Cajamarca,⁶ we will not have an adequate sociobiographical understanding of the first conquerors of Mexico. As for the treatment of the colony of New Spain, the authors incorporate recent scholarship in describing economy, demography, and religion. However, there is no mention of the medieval Iberian-Mediterranean background, little use of the dependency theory, and their analysis of race and colonial status is a bit static. The latter would have been improved if the case studies which exist for Oaxaca had been used (studies in which it is shown that large numbers of people of mixed ancestry were able to attain white status).⁷

The narrative improves as the book develops, and the history of the modern period is the most substantive part of the work. Unlike Simpson, Meyer and Sherman do not treat Santa Anna in a frivolous fashion. The excellent essay

on the loss of Texas and the war with the United States is a balanced and objective analysis that uses Spanish sources to get at the Mexican side of the Texas question. The authors are to be commended for placing the Alamo in proper perspective—noting the greater importance of the battle of Goliad and the execution of 365 American prisoners in crystallizing opposition to Mexico in the United States. The Reforma is considered a period of nascent modernization, with the authors agreeing with Daniel Cosío Villegas that modern Mexico began in 1867. The section on the Díaz dictatorship is superb, owing once again to the authors' good sense in using new scholarship to revise the traditional picture (see note 2).

The organization of the Revolution and contemporary era follows traditional concepts of periodization, with the decade from 1910 to 1920 characterized as the military phase, the 1920–40 period called the constructive phase, and the revolution “shifting gears” after 1940. Meyer's competence as a Mexicanist of revolutionary Mexico is apparent here with his revisionist observation that Huerta's “regime was no counterrevolution; it was in many ways, more farsighted than that of Madero” (p. 531). Meyer also suggests that the Carranza era might prove to be the period of counterrevolution in Mexico, given Carranza's repudiation of many of Huerta's reforms, his antilabor stance, and his plan to kill Zapata.

Meyer's general argument that the military phase was unconstructive—characterized by anarchy, civil war, depreciated currency, and disappointing reforms—would be questioned by some scholars. After all, as John Womack has noted,⁸ this era saw an increase in the labor force for agriculture, some recovery in mining and manufacturing (especially in the Northwest), and U.S. and British mineral and oil exports becoming relatively and absolutely more valuable. Unlike Meyer's argument for the Revolution as a successful antifeudalistic revolt led by a national bourgeoisie, Womack would contend that the Revolution was a victory for foreign capitalists who could shape a situation the national bourgeoisie could not control, a situation which called for the suppression of a major popular revolt against capitalism. The latter scenario would be less likely to contain, as Meyer's does, a plot in which the Cárdenas period of the 1930s ended one era (the feudal one) and began another (the age of modern capitalism). Ideology and periodization aside, the Meyer and Sherman narrative of the Revolution is one of the most complete to appear to date, is based on some of the best scholarship, and includes descriptions of daily life in the countryside and of the intelligentsia of the Revolution which should be required reading.

One hesitates to review other books that must be overshadowed by the completeness and scholarship of *The Course of Mexican History*. Yet Samuel Mayo has the bad fortune of poor timing, and *A History of Mexico* falls far short of the Meyer-Sherman accomplishment. It can best be appreciated as an aesthetic experience; a comprehensive and readable survey featuring literary chapter headings (e.g., the chapter on the Toltecs is called “One Reed, Our Prince, The Serpent of Precious Feathers”; that on California, “El Rincón del Mundo”), quasi-historical figures like Coatli the *pochteca* and Juan de Cuevas the *encomendero*, and interesting examples of the present's dialogue with the past, such as

old engine number 601 standing across from the Mexico City railway station today, a symbol of Díaz' "order and progress." The aim, often achieved, has been to capture some of the excitement of Mexico's past. The book, part of an overall project which included filming and hosting a forty-five hour television series for K.L.C.S. TV, reads more like a script designed to elicit visual images than a history book seeking to inform and challenge.

This work is entirely descriptive and lacks solid analysis in most sections. Because of Mayo's research experience in California and mission archives, the narrative stresses Church history and the borderlands. The book is worth a selective reading on these two topics, even though in other respects it suffers from many limitations. There are several questionable interpretations, and Mayo appears uninterested in the results of historical scholarship since 1970. The bibliography and notes are few in number, dated, and of limited value—including, for the most part, only books. Some unqualified statements might make the specialist wince, as this reviewer did upon reading that Limantour "was an absolute advocate of scientific positivism" (p. 280)—at least Mayo is not wishy-washy. As for his coverage of the revolutionary era, one might wish to read William Weber Johnson's *Heroic Mexico* directly,⁹ instead of Mayo's numerous quotations from that work.

Reflecting the official view of contemporary Mexican history shared by his Mexican press secretary friends, the concluding chapters emphasize the "Mexican miracle," stability, growth, and the responsiveness of PRI rule. As one might guess, Mayo's estimates the deaths at Tlatelolco in 1968 at forty-nine (the *New York Times* estimate)—while Meyer and Sherman suggest that few knowledgeable Mexicans would accept mortality figures under three or four hundred. *A History of Mexico* makes for lively reading, but is definitely for the critical reader only.

In *A Concise History of Mexico*, Jan Bazant has attempted to write a narrative history of national Mexico with the "political narrative set against the dark background of socioeconomic forces" (p. ix). Bazant sees the dominant theme of Mexican history as "the struggle for land on the part of those who do not possess it at all or do not possess it in sufficient quantity to satisfy their basic needs . . . and the striving on the part of landowning families to preserve their position on the social pyramid" (p. ix). Taking this as his central focus, Bazant, an outstanding historian of nineteenth-century Mexico (who has published the prize-winning *Alienation of Church Wealth in Mexico, 1856–1875*; and *Cinco Haciendas Mexicanas*), succeeds best when dealing with that part of the narrative which most closely fits his competence and interest. Thus his coverage of the nineteenth century is well-written, based on recent monographs, and illustrates his theme of land possession and social conflict. Bazant's familiarity with rural properties and the role of the Church is demonstrated throughout the book, especially for the prerevolutionary era.

Bazant interprets the Independence movement as a struggle between the crown and those upper-class landowners who opposed the royal redemption (forced loan) as a potentially wholesale expropriation of Mexican landowners. With Independence, conflict was generated once again by a generation of liberal

reformers who sought to sell Church properties and institute a progressive tax on rents and income. The 1840s witnessed an attempt by Santa Anna to blackmail the Church, a movement by the Gómez Farías government to abolish religious properties, and an attack by Mayan peons on parish and hacendado properties in Yucatán. In one of the best sections of the book, Bazant views the Reforma as an anticlerical struggle, with the Ley Lerdo an instrument for transforming the Church into a giant mortgage bank. Curtailed of the Church as a corporate hacendado set the stage for capitalist development, and Mexico's first modernization started under French control when British funds were attracted for railroad development. This process was accelerated during the Porfiriato.

Unfortunately, as the narrative proceeds, the quality of the chapters declines, with those sections on the Civil War (1910–20) and social reform (1920–40) being weak, sporadic, and more anecdotal than meaningful. Like many writers, Bazant terminates his narrative with the traditional year of 1940. Thus his concept of periodization is not original, although his choice of 1940 tends to reinforce his central thesis by excluding treatment of contemporary, *urban* Mexico. It is obvious that his central theme of land and social conflict is not an adequate hypothesis for twentieth-century history, and for this reason the last two chapters fall far short of their mark—industrialization, urbanization, and the rise of a national, urban bourgeoisie are significant contemporary themes excluded by the author's rural/religious focus. Like the Mayo work, readers seeking a more informative analysis of the twentieth century should refer to Meyer and Sherman's *The Course of Mexican History*. Those wanting to address the issues of twentieth-century political and economic development might also want to read Judith Adler Hellman's *Mexico in Crisis*.¹⁰ The best narrative history remains the already cited *Heroic Mexico* by Johnson.

Collectively these works represent an impressive treatment of Mexico's past, and a broadly based desire by North American and Mexican writers to synthesize the Mexican experience. Yet additional systematic research must be completed before these attempts at synthesis can be made more substantial: the pre-Columbian world still awaits its own first-rate historian-synthesizer; more indigenous sources should be uncovered for the colonial era of Indian-white relations; unifying concepts are especially lacking for the revolutionary era and a variety of economic and demographic issues await analysis (see note 8). Only in this way will the Revolution become history and not fetish. These books, especially that by Meyer and Sherman, point the way. It is ironic that while these books testify to the sufficiency of instructional materials for teaching purposes, the profession is increasingly in need of an interested student audience with deflated dollars.

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NOTES

1. Simpson, *Many Mexicos* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1941, 1946, 1952, 1960, 1969); Parkes, *A History of Mexico* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin

- Company, 1938, 1950, 1960); Cumberland, *Mexico. The Struggle for Modernity* (London, Oxford, & New York: Oxford University Press, 1968). Unlike these American counterparts, the work recently released by El Colegio de México entitled *A Compact History of Mexico* (Mexico, 1974) by Daniel Cosío Villegas and others treats ancient Mexico most adequately given the limitations of space in a brief history.
2. In one brief section on the Porfiriato, Meyer and Sherman introduce several new ideas, each of which is a revision of past historical thinking. For example (pp. 437, 441, and 455–56): Manuel González was not a puppet of Porfirio Díaz, and he actively encouraged the developmental process; the *científicos* were not all orthodox Comteans—they did not have a monolithic philosophical framework; the *rurales* were neither harsh nor efficient; and there is a definite correlation between agrarian protests and railroads. The works cited by Meyer and Sherman are: Donald M. Coerver, "The Porfirian Interregnum: The Presidency of Manuel González of Mexico, 1880–1884" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Tulane University, 1972); William D. Raat, "Ideas and Society in Don Porfirio's Mexico," *The Americas* 30 (1973): 32–53; Paul Vanderwood, "Mexico: The Porfirian Rurales," paper presented at Thirty-Eighth Annual Meeting of the Southern Historical Association, 17 November 1972; John Coatsworth, "Railroads, Landholding, and Agrarian Protest in the Early Porfiriato," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 54 (1974): 55–57.
 3. See Michael Harner, "The Enigma of Aztec Sacrifice," *Natural History* (April 1977): 47–51; and "The Ecological Basis for Aztec Sacrifice," *American Ethnologist* 4 (February 1977): 117–35. See also the criticism of Harner in an article by Peter T. Furst in the *New York Times*, 3 March 1977.
 4. See William T. Sanders and Barbara J. Price, *Mesoamerica: The Evolution of a Civilization* (New York: Random House, 1968).
 5. Sabloff and Rathje, "The Rise of a Maya Merchant Class," *Scientific American* 233 (October 1975): 72–82.
 6. Lockhart, *The Men of Cajamarca: A Social and Biographical Study of the First Conquerors of Peru* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1972).
 7. John K. Chance and William B. Taylor, "Estate and Class in a Colonial City: Oaxaca in 1792," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 19 (October 1977): 454–87; and Chance, *Race and Class in Colonial Oaxaca* (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 1978).
 8. John Womack, Jr., "The Mexican Economy During the Revolution, 1910–1920: Historiography and Analysis," *Marxist Perspectives* 1 (Winter 1978): 80–123.
 9. Johnson, *Heroic Mexico: The Narrative History of a Twentieth-Century Revolution* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, 1968).
 10. Hellman, *Mexico in Crisis* (New York: Holmes & Meier Publishers, Inc., 1978).