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Mexican History Today: Where We Are, Where We Aren't

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The Mexican past has exerted a special hold over historians, in part for the issues it raises, but in part for its singular drama. First come vast pre-Columbian empires, then epic conquests and a long-lived colonial order replete with wealth, splendor, and accomplishment. It might seem like nothing could top those themes, but after 1810 come daring independence wars, painful attempts at state-building, a thirty-five year dictatorship that brings both growth and misery, a decade-long revolution that remains the central event of modern Latin American history, and the emergence of a new order that, like Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal, has been chipped and eroded over the years, but whose core stands remarkably intact. Small wonder that Mexico continues to attract vast amounts of scholarship both within and without its national borders.

This essay attempts to provide some degree of orientation concerning where we stand in terms of modern (that is, post-1810) historical writing, paying particular attention to the production of the last decade. The basic argument is that while interest in what might be called the "middle period" of the slightly overlapping Porfiriato (1876-1911) and Revolution (1910-1920) has declined somewhat, scholarly attention on the preceding early national period (1821-1876) and post-revolutionary years (1920 onward) has gained apace. Add to these trends a healthy increase in certain speciality sub-genres like the careers of key artists and archaeologists, and you have a fair approximation of where we are today in Mexican history. I can't include all writers – in fact, I can't even include most of them – but have tried to hit some representative cases that clue us in as to the direction of history today. For those not mentioned, my apologies, and my hope that they receive just recognition at the hands of a synthesist more talented than myself.

Recovering the Nineteenth Century

The five decades following Agustín de Iturbide's triumphal 1821 entry into Mexico City used to be a time of darkness, but no more. Archival chaos eventually yielded to sound organization and cataloguing, while researchers themselves shed their preconceptions and acquired digital technologies that allow for the accumulation and processing of amounts of microdata so vast as to bewilder. (Who did steal whose chicken, and where? And what became of that chicken?). As a result, the time of troubles has acquired considerably sharper focus.

Starting at the center of national affairs, we have the great debates and machinations that attended Mexican independence, together with the lives of its high-profile actors. Certainly the greatest blockbuster in this area has been Jaime Rodríguez's retelling of independence less as a military struggle and more as a political, constitutional process. This massive work is certain to raise debate, as it gets to a question that has lain at the heart of Mesoamerican history since the days of Eric Wolf: are we talking about a society built on a bedrock of exploitation and dominance, or a world where inclusion and consensus inform public life? Rodríguez clearly favors the latter view, but regardless of one's own inclination, the reader can appreciate that fact that *We Are Now the True Spaniards* ties together a wealth of information and currents that went toward the creation of an independent nation.¹

No doubt about it, constitutional debates inform a great deal of recent writing on the independence and early national years, in part because those debates launched the redefinition of town identities, in part because they left massive paper trails. Both facts emerge all too clearly in *Poder y gobierno local en México, 1808-1857*, an edited collection which traces the constitutional-municipal nexus across many places and variations.² Similar concerns inform Ivana Frasquet's work focusing on the effects that the Spanish Cortes had on the emerging Mexican federalist movement, a political program built on distributing power downward to the states.³ At least two edited collections follow the trajectory of nineteenth-century liberalism in Yucatán.⁴ To a considerable degree, all of these

works fall into the category of a new legal history, the interplay among law, politics, and society.

If any figure dominated the national landscape after 1821, it was Antonio López de Santa Anna. Long reviled as power-mad, unscrupulous, and even lecherous, the Veracruz caudillo finds upward revision in Will Fowler's 2007 biography: here, told as a man of his times, an efficient commander and (at least initially) ardent federalist who shunned both politics and Mexico City. Only after watching approach after approach fail did Santa Anna at last give up on democratic process and attempt to rule directly.⁵ Fowler has followed up this biography with a three-volume edited collection of essays on the role of the pronouncement, and while the authors of those essays necessarily tell different stories, they hit some family resemblances: that pronouncements bespoke real political concerns, that they incorporated individuals beyond the *comandante* and his guard, and that while the process may seem irrational to outsiders, prefacing your revolt with a programmatic statement of intentions could prove both efficacious and logical.⁶

We are fortunate to have a collection of other important new works that contribute to the re-appraisal of late colonial and early struggles, here presented in order of their publication. Juan Ortiz Escamilla traces the emergence of Veracruz's military from its casual early days as a coastal militia – when recruits had to be allowed time off to go fishing – to the final struggle to control San Juan de Ulúa following Iturbide's triumph of September 23, 1821.⁷ Michael Ducey, drawing on the interpretive current that find popular versions of, and participation in, elite political projects, finds such support for the Mexican independence wars in northern Veracruz's interior villages, places where citizenship was shorthand for armed and relatively autonomous communities.⁸

Much of the other material in this field falls into the regionalist category, and with reason: Mexico was still very much a land of localities back then, and stories and concerns root themselves in those localities. Of the many parts of this far-flung society, perhaps none felt less connection to the national project than did the southeast. Yucatán in particular (originally a single province, and not three separate states) saw itself as a land apart, perhaps linked to Mexico, but in no way that couldn't be gotten around. Their attempts to go it alone ended up exacerbating many of Yucatán's darker features of racism and political violence, culminating in the long-lived Caste War. We now know that the story involved much more than Maya insurgent separatists following a Speaking Cross; once set in motion, public violence has a way of seeping into even the smallest details of daily life, and this was certainly how Yucatecans experienced it, eventually trading their free-wheeling chaos for a distinctly undemocratic order under Porfirio Díaz and his state-level counterparts.⁹

But the southeast encompasses more than Yucatán. Just beyond the Laguna de Términos lies Tabasco, a province as little known to historians as it is to most twenty-first century Mexicans. A wetlands in strict geographical terms, Tabasco's often rowdy resistance to outside encroachment makes it the Afghanistan of Mexico. As my own recent monograph documents, the river people fought off *altiplano* federalism, the US Navy, and the French intervention, while even the late Porfirian lumber industry imposed only tenuous federal control. The real Tabasco remained just beneath the surface, like a snapping turtle waiting for its moment, and many of the nineteenth-century dynamics returned with the strongman governorship of Tomás Garrido Canabal.¹⁰ Above all, it is still a land where the rivers rule, and where federal flood control programs always function, except when they don't.

Regional history can also mean the rediscovery of lost ways of thinking, of belief systems that prospered in their moment, only to lose to more aggressive and less equitable methods of land use and social ranking. Mark Saka finds one such system in his history of agrarian socialism in Huasteca region of San Luis Potosí. Under the guidance of radical priest Mauricio de Zavala, the Huastecan peasants advanced a version of Mexican nationalism that was far more inclusive than what was being hammered out in Mexico City. But like their contemporaries, the Yaquis of Sonora, these agrarian visionaries succumbed to federal repression in the early Díaz years.¹¹ In the distance of one hundred fifty years, it's easy enough to write off their beliefs as being as utopian as those of Yucatán's Speaking Cross cult, but as mid-twentieth century histories (discussed below) make clear, the vision of an inclusive agrarian nationalism has not gone away.

Certainly among the most detailed studies of local politicking is José Antonio Serrano Ortega's work on Guanajuato state. If one feature defined the area's changes in power between 1790 and the 1830s, it was the attempt of local patricians to retain control over their own resources, human and otherwise. Most evidently this took place through the rise of the new *ayuntamientos* authorized in the 1812 Spanish Constitution, and sacrosanct ever after. Throughout the long decades of independence struggle and early nation building, few constants abided like the Guanajuato patrician class's grip on city and state office.¹²

The list of regions and their treatments hardly ends here. Rachel Moore explores the nineteenth-century Xalapa by reading that city as Mexico's access point to the world.¹³ Ben Smith tackles Oaxaca's Mixteca Baja region as a

three-century breeding ground for conservative Catholic values.¹⁴ Mario Treviño captures the world of revolts and caudillos that defined so much of Nuevo León history prior to the rise of Porfirian modernizer Bernardo Reyes.¹⁵ The boom in nineteenth-century regional studies shows no signs of abating, and with each addition the hope of a national master narrative recedes further into the distance.

The Decline of Porfirian and Revolutionary Writings

Regarding what must be recognized as the central event of modern Mexican history, there's no other way to say it: we're suffering from Revolution fatigue. After a rash of monumental studies that appeared from the late 1980s to the early 2000s, the topic has been thrashed from top to bottom, and we will probably have to let it sit a while before returning with fresh eyes and fresh paradigms.¹⁶

That being said, new advances continue. I would place among the most useful John Lear's reconstruction of workers in Mexico City before, during, and after the revolution. He asks how is it that the workforce went into 1910 unorganized and unarmed, yet exit as beneficiaries of the new order. The answer lies in the convergence of two factors: a sudden organizational rush during the years of the Madero presidency, and the desperate need for allies on the part of the Constitutionalist forces of Venustiano Carranza and Álvaro Obregón. But in the process Lear provides good social history on the way Porfirian growth re-ordered Mexico City's working-class lives, and the way workers shaped a culture that spoke to their own needs and perceptions.¹⁷

Revolutionary biography did not end with the story of Pancho Villa. Jürgen Buchenau complements his earlier (2007) work on Plutarco Elías Calles with the life of that other leader of the Sonoran dynasty, Álvaro Obregón. Both men emerge as deeply flawed individuals: Calles for the way his planning efficiency conflicted with a largely self-defeating campaign of secularization, and Obregón for the fact that his organizational talents and phenomenal memory ultimately concealed a lack of core vision. Nevertheless, their combined talents did manage to impose some sort of functional order on a society nearly flat on its back from a decade of warfare.¹⁸

Given the ongoing importance of place and province in Mexico, it should come as no surprise that many new histories of the era transpire at the regional level. The 1994 Chiapas uprising has run its course, and while agrarian socialist utopias may have eluded us once more, the conflict left in its wake a massive corpus of scholarship that could support a review essay in itself. Perhaps it's hard to come away with a positive history of this most Central American of all Mexican states, replete with coffee estates, xenophobic mountain communities, and massive racial exploitation, factors which come through all too clearly in Stephen Lewis's 2005 account. Here we find Chiapan elites outflanking revolutionary change at just about every turn, the end result being an unreconstructed Porfirian island well into the 1940s.¹⁹ Complicating Chiapas even further is the long-standing presence of Guatemalan migrant workers, people so accustomed to ping-ponging from one place to another that they almost defy the assignment of national identity.²⁰

If Chiapas has received maximum coverage – war still being God's geography tutorial – the same cannot be said for other pockets of the southeast. Tabasco perennially resists attention, but anyone interested in these critical forty-five years should read Elías Balcázar Antonio's delightful retelling of how progress came to the rowdy Tabascans, with particular attention to the state's relative late (post-1904) banana boom. Thus far, however, no study has emerged to take the place of Carlos Martínez Assad's vivid telling of the whirlwind years of Tabasco's post-revolutionary caudillo Tomás Garrido Canabal, and for that reason we have yet to see how Tabascans outside the world of politics perceived such events as the destruction of churches and the brief reign of prohibition.²¹

Paul Hart's reappraisal of Morelos state and the movement led by Emiliano Zapata concludes on a considerably more positive note. Earlier works on this subject dealt almost entirely with the Porfirian transformation into a sugar planter's paradise, and the corresponding degradation of villagers into estate peons; Hart takes a longer view, exploring how *morelenses* took part in key early national struggles, how they thought in terms of popular agrarian nationalism strongly reminiscent of Saka's agrarian socialism, and how they survived the tumultuous ten years of revolution to eventually receive even more than they had demanded.²² What matters here, I think, is regional history spanning the obvious periodizations and the inclusion of rural peasants in national narratives. As with the writings of Saka, we do not necessarily have to endorse the *morelense* way of thinking as a blueprint valid for all times past and future; ideologies, like land tenure systems, are always transitioning into something else. But in this case we are dealing with an ideology that was both persistent and deeply rooted . . . and, I might add, more valid for central Mexico than for Yucatán, where persistent Maya culture, together with the absence of popular struggles against Spain and the United States, severely weakened the emergence of any peasant nationalism.

The whole issue of how people experienced the Porfiriato, with its legal reforms and economic quickening, informs Emilio Kouri's work on the vanilla region of Papantla, Veracruz. Quite unlike so many other tellings, Kouri's peasants invoke an obscure loophole in the land privatization laws, one that allowed villagers to retain some

degree of communal land use under the title of *condueñazgo*, or co-ownership of a commercial property. The end of village lands did not result in either a land of small property owners, or a string of heartless new haciendas, but rather a mosaic of different struggles as *condueñazgo* holders alternately work with and against *hacendados*, politicians, unscrupulous attorneys, and each other in an effort to adapt to the new order.²³

Exactly when and how we will return to the Revolution remains unclear. Almost all major figures have had biographies, even if some of those are now crisping around the edges. Popular attitudes now seem less inaccessible, and more relevant, than in the days of dependency theory. Adventurers, foreign investment, and international political manipulations have also had their moment. We might anticipate still more studies of how localities, regions, and discreet marginal groups experienced the hard times, studies for the time being destined to supplement, and not overturn, existing knowledge.

The Emergence of Modern Mexico

If Porfirian-Revolutionary studies have dipped a bit, we cannot say the same for histories of 1920 onward, including forays into the far more recent post-1964 period, when Gustavo Díaz Ordaz assumes the presidency to preside over the transition from boom to perpetual legitimacy crisis. In fact, this particular period now draws more attention than any other, in part because twentieth-century societies generate greater paper trails, in part because its temporal proximity to us, coupled paradoxically with our near-total ignorance on so many points, makes it an irresistible target.

For the most part, a tone of skepticism prevails: hardly surprising, perhaps, given that we now live in a time when so many of the verities and institutions of twentieth-century Mexico are in doubt, and when academic works of just about all parts of the world have called into question the efficacy of consciously planned changes in human society. No doubt about it, the years after 1920 had their share of grandiose redesigns, and among the most far-reaching was Mexico's new education system. Very much in the vein of Mary Kay Vaughan's work on the early Secretaría de Educación Pública, Laura Giraudo finds attempts to bring book learning to Indian peoples an at best partial success. Simply trying to figure out who was an Indian wasn't much easier then than it is now, and the grand projects of assimilation education typically foundered on the reef of low budgets, racist preconceptions, and sheer objective difficulties. Then as now, human transformation proved a chimera.²⁴

Of all the periods following 1920, the crusading presidency of Lázaro Cárdenas (1934-1940) has endured a particular bruising. Doubts about this president's halo have been brewing for some time. He sought to create a popular nationalist state grounded in the support of organized workers and peasants, but simultaneously dedicated to secularism, economic development, and technological modernization. This overwhelming and often contradictory program only got so far with smallholding *rancheros* who couldn't imagine a fiesta where the priest wasn't invited. Ben Fallaw's new work on Cárdenas-style state-building, a comparison of attempts in Campeche, Hidalgo, Guerrero, and Guanajuato, finds that coalitions of economic and cultural conservatives usually fought revolutionary reformers to a standstill, and that the old Mexico re-emerged soon enough once Cárdenas was gone.²⁵

So state-builders gave up on rural utopias and turned instead to fostering cities and industry. But if post-1950 Mexico surged in macroeconomic terms, it was also a civilization with discontents, and only now is their story emerging with reasonable clarity. A warning: to read of the revolutionary groups of the 1970s is to enter a strange fantasy world where seventeen men with a mimeograph machine plot to overthrow the Mexican state. And with those plots come all the accouterments of kidnappings, targeted murders, clandestine safe houses, *nommes de guerre*, non-negotiable demands, intestine leadership struggles, and factional divides based on obscure theoretical debates. Fifty years after the fact, this entire period reads as one of the region's great tragedies: tragic for the conditions that generated such attempts, for the misguided if unshakable certainty of the revolutionaries, for the brutal overreaction on the part of the state, and for the scars left on survivors and historical memory. The inability to prevent these movements in a more peaceable fashion ranks alongside early federalism as one of the country's great failures.

The strongest of these movements found leadership among the rural intelligentsia – read, schoolteachers steeped in both local conditions and the fading *cardenista* rhetoric of an order based alliances among peasants, organized labor, and the federal government. After 1940 the state deprioritized most of these alliances in favor of a plutocratic growth that would have tickled Deng Xiaoping. Rank-and-file wage workers lost their clout, but at least shared in the overall trend of urban growth; peasants lost all the way around. It was the schoolteachers and the more conscientious of ejido officials who had the perspective and the snap to recognize the betrayal, and it was they who drew on rural insurgencies both old (*zapatista*) and new (*fidelistas*) to try to do something about it. As Tanalis Padilla documents in her study of Morelos, Rubén Jaramilla walked the line between people's champion and compulsive rebel, and ended up assassinated, along with much of his family, during the presidency of Adolfo López Mateos.²⁶ More famous to the general public are the cases of Genaro Vázquez and above all Lucio Cabañas, Guerrero

state's armed insurgent leaders who both perished under cloudy circumstances in the 1970s. Alexander Aviña's *Specters of Revolution* follows their rise and demise.²⁷ These books leave the reader with a profound moral discomfort. Who was right here? The peasant armed activist who led people to confrontations they could not win? The state that opted for more dramatic overall gains but left its people behind? No clear answer is likely to emerge, but the dilemma lingers at the very heart of Mexican historical experience.

Not all works are that dyspeptic. John Dwyer argues that the Cárdenas reforms had widespread popular support in places like Baja California, and did indeed manage to achieve many of their goals.²⁸ In terms of national politics, Aaron Navarro re-interprets the PRI hegemony as the most appealing option for a time when opposition was usually disunited, unpopular, and self-serving. Far from being some sort of Mexican Cheka, the one-party state's internal espionage system operated at half-throttle, and when on the job tended to waste time by tailing trouble-makers in all-too-obvious automobiles. More than anything, Navarro argues, real PRI hegemony was brief: not seriously in place until the 1950s, and starting to disintegrate by the late 1960s . . . not exactly the seventy-year dynasty of legend.²⁹

Ask Mexicans today what they think of *ejidos*, the complicated system of government-backed land title that emerge from the days of Lázaro Cárdenas, and you're apt to get an earful . . . ranging from angry denouncement to dreams of the utopia that still may be. In fact, as the nation becomes increasingly urban and consumerist, fewer and fewer citizens under age thirty have much awareness of this declining but persistent system. If I had to pick one book that sums up the matter, I would go with Jesús Carlos Morett Sánchez's 2003 overview.³⁰ In this brief volume, the author strips away the myths and misconceptions that have attached themselves to the *ejido*, and hits a balanced interpretation of the strengths and limitations of *ejido* agriculture. *Ejidors* came in two different types, he explains: as collections of individual plots, and as the relatively unpopular collective *ejidos*, which turned out to be more like the state-managed properties that Peru created under General Juan Velasco in the late 1960s. The Cárdenas years created as much small property as it did *ejido* land; levels of productivity vary greatly. Finally, Morett argues, President Carlos Salinas de Gortari's (1988-1994) reform of the Constitution's Article 27 had considerable peasant support, and its enactment has not spelled either the immediate death of the *ejido* or the rebirth of Porfirian-style *latifundia*.

Beyond this world of plows and politics lies the ineffable, the non-material realm – real, imagined, or somehow both – that is the home of religious experience. An abundance of new works give an idea of how the revolution set off spiritual re-imaginings whose consequences can be felt today. We now have reconstructions of popular religiosity in Yucatán and Oaxaca, detailed studies that take us beyond the level of generalization.³¹ In her study of late colonial burial practices, Pamela Voekel argues for a reform Catholicism that sought to put away the ostentatious public piety of an earlier era, and instead replace it with an inner-oriented spirituality not always to the taste either of poor folk or the high and mighty.³² Paul Vanderwood is no longer with us, but he left behind a pioneering corpus of writings whose influence will be felt for a long time. Most significant in terms of post-revolutionary religious experience is his treatment of Juan Soldado, a rapist-murderer-soldier who was summarily executed, and who in one of those ironic twists of things otherworldly has become a folk saint whose cult now extends far beyond its Tijuana origins.³³ Jason Dormady showcases the emergence of Mexican Mormonism and the arch-Catholic Sinarquista movement, but his book's greatest contribution is the history of Luz del Mundo, a 100 percent Mexican religion. To study Luz del Mundo is to enter a world of mega-churches, panoramic candle-light ceremonies, cult-like leadership status, visions of wealth and mobility, and highly contested numbers concerning actual membership. Even if Luz del Mundo doesn't really live up to movement-supplied claim of being the second-largest faith in Mexico, it still bears an amazing story, and a lesson in the way that changes in the profane world proceed in tandem with changes in how we imagine the sacred.³⁴

Assorted Themes

Beyond the obvious periods, we have the good fortune of running into some emerging themes less concerned with periodization than with a critical topic bridging times and locales. The first of these is gender, which in application has usually meant the roles of women. We confront an odd conundrum here. Everyone recognizes a widespread double standard that favored men, and which relegated women to secondary spheres of influence in the home and the church; at the same time, study after study reveals considerably more flexibility than this thumbnail assertion implies. For example, Kathryn Sloan finds that in the nineteenth century, daughters intent on marrying someone against their parents' wishes had more than one way to jump the fence. Above all, they used the legal accusation of *rapto* – a charge lying halfway between kidnaping and elopement – to force disapproving mothers and fathers to accept matrimony as the best way out of a potentially dishonorable situation. As Sloan observes, the post-1870 penal codes recognized greater individual rights, and the state's insertion into what had formerly been parental authority made room for greater maneuverability on the part of young women.³⁵ Sonia Calderoni's work on divorce in Nuevo León turns up a similar conclusion: it was not so much individual liberties (in this case, right to dissolve one's marriage) that increased as a result of the Reform laws, but rather the state's presence as mediator

in matters of family.³⁶ In terms of the twentieth century, the most inclusive work thus far has been Jocelyn Olcott's examination of how the end of the revolutionary wars in 1920 gave birth to a subsequent struggle over the place of women in the emerging society. The book takes us down a list of the organizational problems that have vexed feminist activists in Mexico and elsewhere. To stand apart from men's organizations, or to merge efforts? To chart a radical course, or to pinpoint more limited and specific goals? To work with the state, or against it, or in spite of it? Marxism, friend or foe? One recurring problem highlighted throughout is that petitioning the (decidedly masculine) Mexican state ultimately tended to reinforce attitudes of machismo and patriarchy, even when they bore bread-and-butter results. Particularly damaging was the decision, urged by the Mexican Communist Party as part of the popular-front strategy, of working within the Mexican Revolutionary Party (PRM, later the PRI). Women achieved certain incorporation, but more often than not it involved encapsulation of both voice and goals.³⁷

Environmental history continues to advance, even if environmental riches appear to be on the downhill. Human society derives very much from the conditions the material world imposes upon us, while we, in turn, modify that world to the degree we are able – wisely or otherwise. Several recent studies stress human interaction with natural resources such as water and forests.³⁸ Meanwhile, what is perhaps the greatest human-botanical interaction in the entire history of Mesoamerica features in Gustavo Esteva and Catherine Marielle's review of the history of corn; closely related stands Elizabeth Fitting's study of the rise of transgenic corn.³⁹ Given the current environmental stresses confronting a population that now exceeds one hundred million, we can expect many more such works in the future. Land tenure may be receding as the crucial issue, but access to water has a guaranteed future as the most precious, and most contested, of natural gifts.

A third thematic approach concerns health and medicine. In many cases this shakes out to mean doing something – efficacious or otherwise – about the tropical epidemics that flogged so much of the coastal and semitropical lowlands. Heather McCrea notices that the Yucatecan state grew in part from attempts to keep people from vomiting their lives away from yellow fever. A slightly later version of the story comes from Anne-Emmanuelle Birn, who follows hookworm and yellow fever eradication campaigns into the 1950s. A third work, Marcos Cueto's tale of malaria eradication, gets us into the 1970s, if not necessarily to a malaria-free world. What all of these have in common is the interplay between the Mexican government, international health organizations (either the Rockefeller Foundation or the United Nations), and the local people who were at time grateful beneficiaries, at times resisters to top-down change.⁴⁰ A more surprising tale comes from Gabriela Soto Laveaga's examination of how the wild barbasco root, natural source of estrogen, became the basis for the modern birth-control pill, and how the barbasco-pill nexus changed the lives of all involved.⁴¹ In some ways it's a very new story; in others, it keeps faith with the long litany of export booms that have exploded from nowhere, briefly redefined life and folkways, only to collapse as international markets moved on – think sugar, silver, coffee, bananas, henequen, chicle, and so many other bonanzas of yesteryear.

Booms come and go, but art, we are told, is eternal. Mexico boasts artistic traditions tracing back on side of the family to pre-Columbian murals, ceramics, and architecture; and to European and Islamic styles and techniques on the other. Time was when the words "Mexican art" meant revolutionary mural painters, and that's fine as it goes, but the country's sum total is far more than Diego Rivera and company, and the story of other artists forms as much a part of national history as do tussles over land rights. In a massive new tome, María Elena Altamirano Piolle reconstructs the life and work of the man who was probably Mexico's greatest painter ever, José María Velasco. A poor boy from the unlikely village of Temascalcingo, Mexico state, Velasco received formal training in classical styles, and went on to become the absolute master of his country's arresting landscapes. Velasco could do almost anything he put his mind to, but like Thomas Moran and his treatments of the American west, favored the breath-taking vistas of the *altiplano*. This book brings Velasco's monumental legacy to life in rich detail, and deserves a place in the world's art library.⁴² Leaping over the muralist period, we find new interest in Mexico's surrealist movement, with new works on Leonora Carrington and Remedios Varo.⁴³ In terms of new works on Mexico's musical arts, lovers of soft *bolero* tunes and nights in dreamy Veracruzán cafés will certainly enjoy Andrew Wood's new biography of Agustín Lara, the Mexico City delinquent who grew up to churn out one songbook classic after another, but whose greatest creation may have been his own persona as a port-city romantic.⁴⁴

Speaking of things eternal, archaeology lies at the heart of Mexico in a way that it does not for the United States, a place where, say, Levittown qualifies as historical patrimony. Still, not everyone reads avidly in potsherd studies, and thankfully we have a number of accessible works reconstructing the back story of famous archaeological sites and projects. Paul Sullivan's *Unfinished Conversations*, a classic work on how modern antiquities scholars interacted with locals, pointed the way some time back.⁴⁵ Sullivan then stood alone in the field, but now we have a slew of other such treatments with which to contend. For example, Lawrence Desmond finds one such tale in the labors of the LePlongeon family – the crackpot Augustus and his devoted wife and co-explorer Alice – who did some of the first systematic reconstructions of Chichén Itzá, as well as the site's first photographic treatment. The

LePlongeon couple also got into a dogfight with the federal government over the rights to Chichén's iconic *chac mool* statue, a quarrel that presaged twentieth-century struggles over antiquities rights (Mexico won this first round, by the way, and *chac* stayed put).⁴⁶ Ian Graham's biography of British explorer Alfred Maudslay catches the figure of the archaeologist in a somewhat more professional stage of his evolution, but still working just beyond the institutional margins.⁴⁷ Flash forward a half century, and we have the theme explored in Paul Gillingham's new book: the bogus discovery of the bones of Cuauhtémoc, last Aztec emperor, and the firestorm of national debate they sparked.⁴⁸ If these tussles of science, nation, and property teach anything, it is that antiquity matters; indeed, given the success of *Arqueología mexicana* probably the world's finest popular magazine on the subject, it's only becoming more important with time. And with Mexico's staggering wealth of pre-Columbian and colonial antiquities, there are probably a few library shelves waiting to be filled with books of similar approach.

After petroleum and remittances from abroad, Mexico's key source of foreign credits remains tourism. No surprise here: given the biodiversity, cultural richness, and dramatic landscapes, the country has drawn foreign appreciation since (and indeed, before) the days when Austrian botanist Karl Heller traveled so much of the center and southeast.⁴⁹ Mercifully, conditions have improved since the days when travelers slept in Indian huts replete with anthills and mosquitoes, but the doubts, misunderstandings, and contradictions of travel encounters certainly continue. Dina Berger and Andrew Wood explore many of these ripples and undercurrents in their new edited collection on foreigners in Mexico, and while the messages in such a work necessarily tend to vary, collectively the essays remind us that tourism involves money and power; that it often dovetails with national projects; and that it has the power to shape the roles of both visitor and visited.⁵⁰

Finally, there's also the emerging genre of what might lamentably called *narcohistoria* (everything else in Mexico gets a *narco-* prefix these days, so why not our discipline?). To be honest, many of the writings I'm about to mention cannot really be considered history: they're too new, far too immediate, and lack the long-term resolution, together with the ample documentation, necessary for historical reading. They're journalistic pieces, but that's not said to deride them: quite the contrary, the individuals who write about this topic often risk their lives to put words on paper. They describe situations in a state of profound flux (*capos* have about a three-year run before being arrested, killed, or overthrown), and for that reason much of the information is outdated even as it appears. Nevertheless, the whole narco-trafficking disaster is a part of a shared US-Mexican world, and has to be looked into. Mexican journalists lead the way here, and as a representative piece we might point to the work of Jorge Fernández Menéndez and Víctor Ronquillo, who attempted to provide an overview of this fast-changing underworld as it looked in the time of the Vicente Fox presidency.⁵¹ Malcolm Beith's account of the career of Joaquín "Chapo" Guzmán ends with a DEA agent sighing, "I doubt he will ever fall" (p.213). That remark now looks premature, given Guzmán's internment in a maximum security prison in Mexico City, with a sheaf of federal indictments and an equally tall stack of extradition demands from the US. But what matters, I think, is the fact that Beith puts together a coherent, readable account of how the son of impoverished *gomeros*, or poppy farmers, rose to power and set off a turf war that rages to the present day.⁵² One common denominator of the two previously mentioned works is that they focus on the upper chain of command. Conversely, anthropologist Howard Campbell explores the little people among whom most of the traffic and consumption takes place, and the way that the constant quest for sales, purchases, and mere survival becomes part of a daily routine for those involved: the narco-quotidian, if we can allow that term.⁵³

Conclusion

It's hard to find unifying themes in historical writing, for the simple fact that historical experience itself lacks unity. Diversity of approaches also owes to the far greater number of people working in the field, the corresponding need to distinguish oneself in terms of personal approach, and today's far greater claims to what themes lie within the compass of historical writing. I do notice, however, that most writings of the last fifteen years point to disjunctions separating intention, action, and consequence. The issue emerged earlier in this essay with regard to *cardenismo*, but its implications extend far beyond. The plains of Mexico are littered with the bones of planners and the visionaries of a new and perfect order. Their dreams never came to pass exactly as they imagined, and as if scripted by Hegel himself, what followed was a compromise between their futuristic dreams and the customs of a persistent past. That may be disconcerting for those drawn to order and logic, but it's at least preferable to the alternative, an over-determined vision in which things happened because and in the way that they were intended to happen.

I also notice an ongoing fascination with what might loosely be terms "the popular": popular religion, popular liberalism, popular nationalism, popular agrarianism, and on through the compendium of abstract nouns. Doubtless this reflects the nation's vast gulf between the urban intelligentsia and the rural masses, a nation where any idea or project had to bounce between social extremes. Few would deny the importance of this perspective. But this matter of the popular does raise challenges, not the least of which is how to get at it. Documentation is often scarce, causing Mexican historians to resemble those antiquities scholars who analyze whole eras on the basis of a

handful of inscriptions. Indeed, a heavy dose of interpretation usually accompanies histories of the popular. To make matters worse, conceptual difficulties lurk at every turn. The gods of history drew no line between the popular and whatever its opposite may be. Unpopular? Elite? Formal? Correct? These words resist clear definition, and each of them threatens to carry us into slippery conceptual territory. Beyond all that lies the matter of advocacy. It's usually understood that we resurrect the popular with an eye to vindication, but vindicating people isn't and shouldn't be our job. Just as biographers risk falling in love with their subjects, we archaeologists of the popular spend so much time with the tiny figures of our field that we start to feel the attraction ourselves. If Mexico's *científico* doctrines were insensitive, racist, and tendentious, the popular foil could be cruel, ignorant, impractical, myopic, and just plain wrong-headed. What's a historian to do, except keep distance?

It is customary for articles of this sort to end with a laundry list of suggestions for further study, often couched in phrases like, "We still know little about how the milkmaids of Aguascalientes experienced the presidency of Manuel González." But here I would like to end on what will doubtless be considered a grumpy note, by pointing to a lacuna of an entirely different sort. While historical writing has pushed into realms unimaginable to Eric Wolf, the actual art of writing has not kept pace. To ask how history should be written is to beg an even more difficult question: What is history? A humanity? A social science? Just comb through college organizations around the country, and you'll get different answers. The truth is that history is a hybrid discipline, and even that word "discipline" might best be tossed; I think I'd prefer to call it an art, a pursuit, or an endeavor. That's not going to suit academic establishments founded on the rock of government- and industry-funded grants, but neither of those avenues were what drove Herodotus and Thucydides to get down into words what they recognized as the greatest events of their times. The past is gone, and only exists when we conjure it into existence through our words; sadly, we are not always rising to the challenge. There are still good people carrying the torch, but each year produces monographs formed around dissertational minutia. The reasons are many, and there's blame enough to go around: an overall sag in reading and writing skills, professional concerns overtaking artistic sensibilities, excessive politics and advocacy, and the sad day when we decided we were social scientists and laid down the pen in favor of the protractor. One way or another, the problem is there.

If you got into history to begin with, it was because you obtained some sense of understanding the world by watching the unfolding of its events. The stories were what nailed it into your heart. The currents operating in academic historical writing today are taking us into remote corners, but too seldom with the words, the art, or the narrative skill to come away with the sort of compelling stories that got us here to begin with. I said grumpy, because I see less and less of this operating today. Mere grammatical proficiency is not enough. There was a time when we read about the wind that swept Mexico, and when we did, we knew we were reading something important. The same can't always be said for today's microhistories.

Notes

- 1 Jaime E. Rodríguez O., "We Are Now the True Spaniards", *Sovereignty, Revolution, Independence, and the Emergence of the Federal Republic of Mexico, 1808-1824* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012). This work was actually published first in Spanish, under the title, *Nosotros somos ahora los verdaderos españoles: La transición de la Nueva España de un reino de la monarquía española a la república federal mexicana, 1808-1824*, 2 vols. (Mexico City: El Colegio de Michoacán, Instituto Mora, 2009).
- 2 María del Carmen Salinas Sandoval, Diana Birrichaga Gardida, and Antonio Escobar Ohmstede, eds., *Poder y gobierno local en México, 1808-1857* (Mexico City: Colegio de México, 2011).
- 3 Ivana Frasquet, *Las caras del águila: Del liberalismo gaditano a la república federal mexicana (1820-1824)* (Xalapa: Universidad Veracruzana, Universidad Jaume, 2008).
- 4 Sergio Quezada, ed., *Encrucijadas de la ciudadanía y la democracia: Yucatán, 1812-2004* (Mérida: Universidad Autónoma de Yucatán, LVII Legislatura H. Congreso del Estado de Yucatán 2004-2007); Sergio Quezada and Inés Ortiz Yam, eds., *Yucatán en la ruta del liberalismo mexicano, siglo XIX* (Mérida: Universidad Autónoma de Yucatán, 2008).
- 5 Will Fowler, *Santa Anna of Mexico* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007).
- 6 Will Fowler, ed., *Forceful Negotiations: The Origins of the Pronunciamiento in Nineteenth-Century Mexico* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2010); *Malcontents, Rebels, & Pronunciados: The Politics of Insurrection in Nineteenth-Century Mexico* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2012); *Celebrating Insurrection: The Commemoration and Representation of the Nineteenth-Century Mexican Pronunciamiento* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2013).

- 7** Juan Ortiz Escamilla, *El teatro de la guerra: Veracruz, 1850-1825* (Xalapa: Universidad Veracruzana, Universitat Jaume, 2008).
- 8** Michael T. Ducey, *A Nation of Villages: Riot and Rebellion in the Mexican Huasteca, 1750-1850* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2004).
- 9** Terry Rugeley, *Rebellion Now and Forever: Mayas, Hispanics, and Caste War Violence in Yucatán, 1800-1880* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009).
- 10** Terry Rugeley, *The River People in Flood Time: The Civil Wars in Tabasco, Spoiler of Empires* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014).
- 11** Mark Saad Saka, *For God and Revolution: Priest, Peasant, and Agrarian Socialism in the Mexican Huasteca* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2013).
- 12** José Antonio Serrano Ortega, *Jerarquía territorial y transición política: Guanajuato, 1790-1836* (Zamora: El Colegio de Michoacán, Instituto Mora, 2001).
- 13** Rachel A. Moore, *Forty Miles from the Sea: Xalapa, the Public Sphere, and the Atlantic World in Nineteenth-Century Mexico* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2011).
- 14** Benjamin T. Smith, *The Roots of Conservatism in Mexico: Catholicism, Society, and Politics in the Mixteca Baja, 1750-1962* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2012).
- 15** Mario Treviño, *Entre caciques y caudillos: Nuevo León, siglo XIX* (Monterrey: Universidad Autónoma de Nuevo León, 2009).
- 16** The list of blockbusters includes Francois-Xavier Guerra, *México: Del antiguo régimen a la revolución*, 2 vols. (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1988, with the original French edition in 1985); Alan Knight, *The Mexican Revolution*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); John Mason Hart, *Revolutionary Mexico: The Coming and Process of the Mexican Revolution* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989) and *Empire and Revolution: Americans in Mexico since the Civil War* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006); and Friedrich Katz, *The Life and Times of Pancho Villa* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).
- 17** John Lear, *Workers, Neighbors, and Citizens: The Revolution in Mexico City* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001).
- 18** Jürgen Buchenau, *Plutarco Elías Calles and the Mexican Revolution* (Lanham: Rowan and Littlefield, 2007); *The Last Caudillo: Álvaro Obregón and the Mexican Revolution* (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011).
- 19** Stephen E. Lewis, *The Ambivalent Revolution: Forging State and Nation in Chiapas, 1910-1945* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2005).
- 20** See Catherine A. Nolan-Ferrell, *Constructing Citizenship: Transnational Workers and Revolution on the Mexico-Guatemalan Border, 1880-1950* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2012).
- 21** Elías Balcázar Antonio, *Tabasco en sepia: Economía y sociedad, 1880-1940* (Villahermosa: Universidad Juárez Autónoma de Tabasco, 2003); Carlos Martínez Assad, *El laboratorio de la revolución: El Tabasco garridista* (Mexico City: Siglo XIX, 1979).
- 22** Paul Hart, *Bitter Harvest: The Social Transformation of Morelos, Mexico, and the Origins of the Zapatista Revolution, 1840-1910* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2005).
- 23** Emilio Kourí, *A Pueblo Divided: Business, Property, and Community in Papantla, Mexico* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004).
- 24** Laura Giraudó, *Anular las distancias: Los gobiernos posrevolucionarios en México y la transformación cultural de indios y campesinos* (Madrid: Centro de Estudios Políticos y Constitucionales, 2008).
- 25** Ben Fallaw, *Religion and State Formation in Postrevolutionary Mexico* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013).
- 26** Tanalis Padilla, *Rural Resistance in the Land of Zapata: The Jaramillista Movement and the Myth of the Pax Priísta, 1940-1962* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).

- 27** Alexander Aviña, *Specters of Revolution: Peasant Guerrillas in the Cold War Mexican Countryside* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).
- 28** John J. Dwyer, *The Agrarian Dispute: The Expropriation of American-Owned Rural Land in Postrevolutionary Mexico* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).
- 29** Aaron W. Navarro, *Political Intelligence and the Creation of Modern Mexico, 1938-1954* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2010).
- 30** Jesús Carlos Morett Sánchez, *Reforma agraria: Del latifundio al neoliberalismo* (México: Plaza y Valdés Editores, 2003).
- 31** Terry Rugeley, *Of Wonders and Wise Men: Religion and Popular Cultures in Southeast Mexico, 1800-1876* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001); Edward Wright-Rios, *Revolution in Mexican Catholicism: Reform and Revelation in Oaxaca, 1887-1934* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).
- 32** Pamela Voekel, *Alone Before God: The Religious Origins of Modernity in Mexico* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002).
- 33** Paul J. Vanderwood, *Juan Soldado: Rapist, Murderer, Martyr, Saint* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).
- 34** Jason H. Dormady, *Primitive Revolution: Restorationist Religion and the Idea of the Mexican Revolution, 1940-1968* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2011).
- 35** Kathryn A. Sloan, *Runaway Daughters: Seduction, Elopement, and Honor in Nineteenth-Century Mexico* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2008).
- 36** Sonia Calderoni, *Los límites de lo tolerable: El divorcio en Nuevo León, 1850-1910* (Monterrey: Fondo Editorial de Nuevo León, 2008).
- 37** Jocelyn Olcott, *Revolutionary Women in Postrevolutionary Mexico* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).
- 38** Andrew S. Matthews, *Instituting Nature, Authority, Expertise, and Power in Mexican Forests* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011); Christopher A. Boyer, ed., *A Land Between Waters: Environmental Histories of Modern Mexico* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2014).
- 39** Gustavo Esteva and Catherine Marielle, eds., *Sin maíz no hay país* (Mexico City: Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, 2005); Elizabeth Fiting, *The Struggle of Maize: Campesinos, Workers, and Transgenic Corn in the Mexican Countryside* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).
- 40** Heather McCrea, *Diseased Relations: Epidemics, Public Health and State-Building in Yucatán, Mexico, 1847-1924* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2010); Anne-Emmanuelle Birn, *Marriage of Convenience: Health and Revolutionary Mexico* (Rochester: University of Rochester, 2006); Marcos Cueto, *Cold War, Deadly Fevers: Malaria Eradication in Mexico, 1955-1975* (Woodrow Wilson Center, 2007).
- 41** Gabriela Soto Laveaga, *Jungle Laboratories: Mexican Peasants, National Projects, and the Making of the Pill* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).
- 42** María Elena Altamirano Piolle, José María Velasco, *Paisajes de luz, horizontes de modernidad* (Mexico City: DCE/Equilibrista, 2006).
- 43** Alberto Ruy Sánchez and Margarita de Orellana, *Five Keys to Remedios Varo* (Mexico City: Arte de México, 2008); Sean Kissane, ed., *Leonora Carrington* (Dublin: Irish Museum of Art, 2013).
- 44** Andrew Grant Wood, *Agustín Lara: A Cultural Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).
- 45** Paul Sullivan, *Unfinished Conversations: Mayas and Foreigners Between Two Wars* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989).
- 46** Lawrence Gustave Desmond, *Yucatán Through Her Eyes: Alice Dixon Le Plongeon, Writer & Expeditionary Photographer*, forward by Claire L. Lyons (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2009).
- 47** Ian Graham, *Alfred Maudslay and the Maya: A Biography* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2002).

- 48** Paul Gillingham, *Cuauhtémoc's Bones: Forging National Identity in Modern Mexico* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2011).
- 49** Karl Heller, *Alone in Mexico: The Astonishing Travels of Karl Heller, 1845-1848*, translated and edited by Terry Rugeley (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2007).
- 50** Dina Berger and Andrew Grant Wood, eds., *Holiday in Mexico: Critical Reflections on Tourism and Tourist Encounters* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).
- 51** Jorge Fernández Menéndez and Víctor Ronquillo, *De los Maras a los Zetas: Los secretos del narcotráfico, de Colombia a Chicago* (Mexico City: Grijalbo, 2006).
- 52** Malcolm Beith, *The Last Narco: Inside the Hunt for El Chapo, the World's Most Wanted Drug Lord* (New York: Grove Press, 2010).
- 53** Howard Campbell, *Drug War Zone: Frontline Dispatches from the Streets of El Paso and Juárez* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009).