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A Concise History of Mexico

Mexico's fascinating complexities are difficult to approach. This illustrated *Concise History* begins with a brief examination of contemporary issues, while the book as a whole – ranging from the Olmecs to the present day – combines a chronological and thematic approach while highlighting long-term issues and controversies over interpretation.

Modern Mexico, founded after independence from Spain in 1821, was a state created out of a long and disparate historical inheritance, which has constantly influenced its evolution. This book takes account of that past and pays attention to the pre-Columbian and Spanish colonial influence, bearing in mind that Mexico today is not necessarily either culturally or territorially identical to those past societies. Mexico's economic problems are given historical treatment together with political analysis and attention to social developments and cultural factors. The book stresses several prevailing themes: the tension between constitutional and personal or group power, the debate over federalism and the expansion of central power, the opposition between liberalism and the Catholic inheritance, nationalism and Mexico's global position, indigenous cultures and national integration, and the problems of legitimising and transferring political power. The overriding issue of Mexico's relationship to the United States also emerges as a central theme.

The book's prime objective is accessibility to a range of readers, including those interested in gaining a broad general knowledge of the country and those across the professions anxious to acquire a rapid but secure understanding of a subject where there are few starting points.

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Dionisio alegaba que él no era antiyanqui . . . por más que no hubiese niño nacido en México que no supiera que los gringos, en el siglo XIX, nos despojaron de la mitad de nuestro territorio, California, Utah, Nevada, Colorado, Arizona, Nuevo México y Texas. La generosidad de México, acostumbraba decir Dionisio, es que no guardaba rencor por ese terrible despojo, aunque sí memoria. En cambio, los gringos ni se acordaban de esa guerra, ni sabían que era injusta. Dionisio los llamaba 'Estados Unidos de Amnesia'. . . El hecho es que si los gringos nos chingaron en 1848 con su 'destino manifesto', ahora México les daría una sopa de su propio chocolate, reconquistándolos con mexicanísimas baterís lingüísticas, raciales y culinarias.

Dionisio maintained that he wasn't anti-Yank . . . even though everyone born in Mexico knew that the Gringos in the nineteenth century had stripped Mexico of half its national territory – California, Utah, Nevada, Colorado, Arizona, New Mexico and Texas. Mexico's natural genorisity, Dionisio was accustomed to say, meant that she bore no grudges: however, that didn't mean she'd forgotten. The Gringos, though, didn't even remember they'd fought the war, let alone that it had been unjustified. For that reason, Dionisio would call their country, the 'United States of Amnesia'. . . The fact is that, if the Gringos fucked us up in 1848 with their 'Manifest Destiny', now Mexico would give them a taste of their own medicine, reconquering the lost territories by the most Mexican of methods – the Spanish language, racial identity, and the national cuisine.

Carlos Fuentes, *La frontera cristalina* (Mexico 1995)

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PREFACE

Research on Mexico is an exciting and fast-developing topic. Perspectives are repeatedly changing. Mexico, with a population around 95 million, forms part of the North American sub-continent. Since the early sixteenth century, it has been part of the Atlantic world that resulted from European expansion. Before that time, Mexico was also part of a pre-Columbian world unknown to Europeans. For that reason, the country has a complex multi-ethnic and multi-cultural pattern that continues to have an impact on contemporary events. Nevertheless, anyone interested in Mexico quickly discovers that there are few things for the beginner to read. At the same time, those who perhaps might have returned from their first visit to the country will frequently look in vain for a book which enables them to analyse what they have seen with any thematic coherence. I myself have long been conscious of such a gap in the literature. For that reason, I decided to write this book. The bibliography should help the reader to branch out in whichever may be the preferred thematic direction. Since *The Concise History* must rise above the detailed monographic type of work and identify the broad outlines of Mexican history, I hope it will also find some resonance among fellow disciplinarians.

I first went to Mexico as a research student in January 1966. A great deal of my own history has been lived there since that time, and the country itself has in some respects changed beyond recognition. The scale of change reflects a dynamic North American society such as Mexico. Yet, at the same time, particularly in the provinces and

the villages, and in general attitudes and assumptions, a great deal of the traditional outlook, for better or for worse, still persists. In many individuals, the outward styles of the turn of the twenty-first century go together with the mentalities of the seventeenth.

Approaching Mexican history as I initially did from the geographical perspectives of the centre and south, the core zones of Mesoamerican civilisation, I was always conscious of the deeply rooted inheritance of the indigenous American past. My consciousness of the importance of the pre-Columbian era has grown over the years that I have been involved in studying Mexico. This is so particularly since the region I originally studied was Oaxaca, the centre of Zapotec and Mixtec cultures and still a state with an indigenous majority. My specialisation then was the late colonial era. When I first arrived in Mexico I came by sea from Cádiz after a long period of study in the Archive of the Indies in Seville. I sailed on a 6,000–ton Spanish ship which took two and a half weeks to reach Veracruz by way of Venezuela, Puerto Rico, and the Dominican Republic. After the turbulent January winds across the Gulf of Mexico, I certainly didn't arrive on Mexican soil feeling like a Conquistador. Nevertheless, I had come to Mexico to study the colonial era, and bold decisions had to be made as to how to go about it. In the cities and towns of the central core of Mexico from Zacatecas (where the north begins) to Oaxaca in the south, the richness of a colonial culture transforming from European to American can be immediately appreciated. Cities such as Puebla, Tlaxcala, Querétaro, Guanajuato, Morelia (then Valladolid), San Luis Potosí, Zacatecas and the capital itself all exhibit an architectural and artistic wealth comparable to European cities of the period. My experience as a 'Mexicanist' began that way. However, many other tendencies have emerged since then, the most recent being deepening interest in the north. Readers will find the north and the 'far north' (currently described in the USA as the 'American Southwest') abundantly present in the following pages.

This book adopts a number of significant positions. It does not start in 1821 with the independence of Mexico from the Spanish Empire. It does not assume that in historical perspective Mexico should be defined as the truncated political entity of the period after 1836–53, when the United States acquired half of Mexico's claimed

territory. The approach is thematic as well as chronological, allusive perhaps rather than all-inclusive. The book opens with a look at Mexico today and a few suggestions about how it came to be that way. After this, we shall then go back to the pre-Columbian era for the real historical beginning, and continue forwards from there through a combination of themes and chronology. The periodisation I have adopted corresponds more to contemporary reinterpretations of Mexican history than to traditional approaches. Even so, halfway through writing, I abandoned the notion of a 'mature colonial period', proposed by James Lockhart and Stuart Schwartz, *Early Latin America. A History of Colonial Spanish America and Brazil* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1983), on the grounds that this was highly misleading. Those authors envisaged a broad span from 1580 to 1750, within which 'large-scale social and cultural transformation quietly, gradually took place'. I should prefer formative to mature, an entirely different concept. In any case, 1580 is too early: my preference would be for a date around 1620.

In attempting a revised periodisation, I still found I had to compromise significantly. I had originally hoped to bridge the traditional historiographical divisions at Independence (1810–21) and the Revolution (1910–40) by a more radical periodisation: 'Destabilisation and Fragmentation (1770–1867)'; 'Reconstruction (1867–1940)'; and 'The Monopoly Party (1940–2000)'. However, I still found that the dividing lines at 1810 and 1910 could not and should not be avoided. At the same time, I have compromised by placing these more traditional turning points within the context of my original broader sweeps. It seemed to me also that the collapse of the French Intervention and with it Maximilian's Second Empire in 1867 represented a major turning point in the nineteenth century. This signified the end of European attempts to recover control in Mexico and assured the survival of the sovereign state which had emerged from the War with the United States (1846–48). Similarly, 1940 and 1970 emerged as subsequent points of arrival and departure. The former initiated the period of consolidation of revolutionary changes and provided a symbolic starting point for three decades of economic expansion and political stability; the latter opened the way for descent into three decades of political division and economic dislocation. These lines of demarcation are, of course, subject to criticism

and revision. I hope that the question of periodisation will occupy part of the ongoing historical debate concerning the interpretation of Mexican (and Latin American) history.

Colleagues and friends in Mexico and elsewhere have contributed to this book, sometimes without realising it. Many rewarding conversations helped to give it shape. First and foremost, I owe Dr Luis Jáuregui (UNAM: Faculty of Economics) the debts of friendship, hospitality, and use of his broad-ranging library. Many of the ideas which we discussed in 1997–98 appear in the following text. I am grateful for his criticisms and advice both informally and in reading the manuscript. Accordingly, this book is dedicated to him by way of thanks. Dr Josefina Zoraída Vázquez (El Colegio de México) has been a continuous source of encouragement and support in many of my recent projects, and always a stimulating critic and discussant. Professor Brian Connaughton (UAM – Iztapalapa) has also been a great help in probing the problems and issues of late-colonial and nineteenth-century Mexican history, not only as a result of seminars at the UAM, but also in regular, three-hour breakfasts in Mexico City, which have ranged across the dynamics of Mexican culture. Dr Bernardo García Martínez (El Colegio de Méxíco), author of an alternative concise history of Mexico, pressed home to me the dynamics of the north in a memorable conversation in a Gallego restaurant in Mexico City in March 1996, and thereby contributed decisively to my shift in perspective. Professor Paul Vanderwood (San Diego State University), who has been a source of ideas and a good critic over two decades, gave me his hospitality in San Diego at a crucial stage of rethinking and writing early in January 1998. The libraries of the Instituto José María Luis Mora and the Centro de Estudios de Historia de México (CONDUMEX) provided agreeable places of study. Students and colleagues at the State University of New York at Stony Brook, Strathclyde University, and Essex University helped refine the ideas and interpretations offered here. I am particularly grateful to Xavier Guzmán Urbiola and Carlos Silva Cázares, in Mexico City, for their help in selecting the illustrations and maps which form a significant part of this work. Sven Wair gave the manuscript a critical reading before submission to the press: his perceptive comments have made for a tighter piece of work.