
I

Mexico in perspective

Mexico may be part of the 'New World' (in the European nomenclature), but in reality much of the territory included within the present-day Republic formed part of a very old world unknown to Europeans before the end of the fifteenth century. This pre-Columbian past needs to be appreciated when attempting to explain both colonial and contemporary Mexico. We need to examine the way a distinct Mexican civilisation has expressed itself through time. The chronological and thematic sweep explains the structure and approach. The main purpose is to lay out the principal themes and issues. The detail may be found in many specific works. Contemporary Mexico has both an ostensibly stable political system and a capacity for grass-roots mobilisation, centrifugal tendencies, varied beliefs and distinctive local practices.

Modern territorial boundaries distort the cultural unities of the pre-Columbian world. The geographical dimension of Maya civilisation, for instance, included areas that would in colonial times become the south-eastern territories of the Viceroyalty of New Spain (namely Yucatán) and the core territories of the Kingdom of Guatemala. Although sites like Palenque, Bonampak, and Yaxchilán are located in Chiapas, and Uxmal and Chichén Itzá in Yucatán, both states part of the Mexican Republic, Classic Period Maya sites such as Tikal, Uaxactún, and Copán are in the Republics of Guatemala and Honduras, respectively. Today, knowledge of Maya civilisation is disseminated in Mesoamerica from the capital city museums of contemporary states, even though these cities, particularly Mexico City, played no part at all in its original flourishing. In that sense, the Maya inheritance has been appropriated by the national states

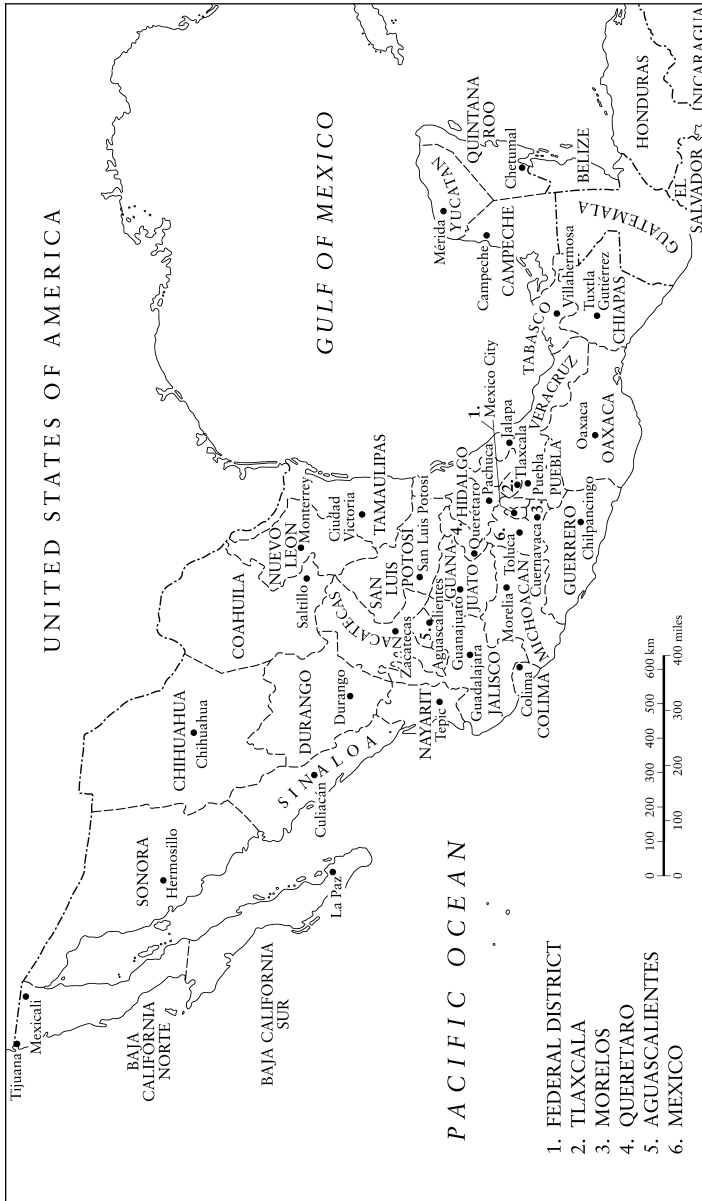
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Map 1 Modern Mexico at the turn of the millennium.

to reinforce their historical identity and legitimacy. As in many other instances, the once-vanished Maya world has been brought back to life in order to serve a contemporary political purpose.

Two central processes have been at work since the collapse of the pre-Columbian world: the creation of a Spanish colonial viceroyalty out of the existing indigenous political and ethnic units, and the development of a modern Mexican nation-state out of the former viceroyalty. One can see immediately that in both processes discontinuities and continuities existed side by side. The discontinuities and radical differences between contemporary Mexico and the pre-Columbian and colonial eras make it imperative that we do not write history backwards from the perspective of the present day.

Geography and environment help to explain economic and political developments in Mexico through the historical perspective. Ethnic and linguistic diversity combined with regional and local disparities have shaped Mexican society and have defined its distinctive culture. A number of obvious contrasts come to mind immediately: the modernity, dynamism, and openness of the north, the cultural and ethnic mixtures of the core zone from Zacatecas and San Luis Potosí to Oaxaca, and the Maya world of Yucatán and Chiapas. Federalism, first adopted in 1824, was intended to reflect this diversity and give institutional life to the changing relationships between region and centre and between the regions themselves. For much of the twentieth century, however, federalism remained a dead letter.

NATIONALISM AND TERRITORY

The makers of Independence saw their country as the successor state not only to the Spanish colonial Viceroyalty of New Spain but also to the Aztec Empire originally established in 1325 in Tenochtitlán at the centre of Lake Texcoco. For Mexican nationalists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the Aztec inheritance became fundamental to any comprehension of nationhood. It distinguished Mexico from other Hispanic-American societies, as well as from the United States. At the same time, the argument that Mexico existed as a nation before the Spanish Conquest in 1521 not only undermined the legitimacy of Spanish rule but also provided a platform of resistance to the French Intervention of 1862–67. Liberal President Benito Juárez (1806–72), though born a

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Zapotec from the southern state of Oaxaca, identified himself with Cuauhtémoc, the last Aztec Emperor, who had resisted Hernán Cortés until put to death by him. The victorious Liberals of the Reform era (1855–76) portrayed the execution of the Archduke Maximilian of Habsburg, who had presided over the Second Mexican Empire (1864–67), as the revindication of the fallen Aztec Empire, the reaffirmation of independence, and the means of solidifying republican institutions. As a Habsburg, Maximilian was the descendant of Charles V, in whose name Cortés had overthrown the Aztec Empire.

The Revolution of 1910–40 reaffirmed the symbolism of Mexican republican nationalism, which has formed an essential aspect of the ideology of the monopoly ruling party since its first constitution as the Partido Nacional Revolucionario (PNR) in 1929. The Aztec myth has been carried beyond its original territorial base to encompass the entire Republic. Neo-Aztecism, which first emerged in the eighteenth century, has formed part of the ideology of the contemporary state. In fact, Octavio Paz (1914–98), awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1990, has argued that the Aztec pyramid was the paradigm for the monopoly-party state, which characterised much of twentieth-century Mexican history.

Modern Mexico, however, is not and never was coterminous with the looser political units ruled at the time of Cortés's arrival by Moctezuma II and his predecessors. Effectively, the northern limits of the Aztec state hardly reached present-day San Juan del Río, about two hours' drive north of Mexico City. This line did not, however, signify the northern limits of settled culture, since the Tarascan territory of Michoacán and the princedoms in the territory of present-day central Jalisco existed beyond Aztec control. Furthermore, the sites of La Quemada and Altavista, in the present-day State of Zacatecas, provide evidence of sedentary cultures in Tuitlán in the heart of territory later under nomad control.

When the Spanish Conquerors established their capital on the ruins of Tenochtitlán, they could hardly have imagined that within a few decades Hispanic rule would push further northwards into hitherto unsubdued territories. Similarly, they could not have anticipated the tenacity of the resistance they would encounter throughout the rest of the century. The Spaniards founded several specifically Hispanic cities within the settled Indian heartlands in the aftermath of the Conquest.

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Puebla de los Angeles (1531) and Guadalajara (1542) were the principal examples. These cities became centres of expansion for Hispanic culture among the surviving indigenous population. Contemporary Mexico, however, also developed from the original, sixteenth-century thrust northwards, with Guadalajara itself in a forward position in the centre-west.

The Viceroyalty of New Spain, established in 1535, was a Spanish political entity superimposed upon pre-existing indigenous states and subdued peoples. Until its collapse in 1821, it remained subordinate to the metropolitan government in Spain. The discovery of rich silver deposits in the north-centre and north required military expansion well beyond the Río Lerma and the prompt consolidation of Hispanic rule. In such a way, the push to the north became a dynamic element in New Spain's history from early in the colonial experience. The north ensured that New Spain would be much more than the agglomeration of distinct indigenous polities under Hispanic rule.

The Mexican north and far north (the latter refers to territory beyond the Río Bravo or Rio Grande now in the United States) remained only loosely connected to the political centre in Mexico City. A series of administrative units generally under a military commander attempted to define Spanish control. Though called Kingdoms – such as Nueva Galicia (capital: Guadalajara), Nueva Vizcaya (Durango), and Nuevo León (Monterrey) – they formed part of the Viceroyalty until the organisation of the Commandancy General of the Interior Provinces in 1776. The uncertainties of the northern frontier and Mexico City's reluctance to contribute effective financing to resolve the military problem with the unpacified Indian groups continually frustrated territorial consolidation. New Spain bequeathed this ongoing problem to the Mexican sovereign state after 1821. As we shall see in chapter five, decades of deteriorating government finance in the late colonial period left independent Mexico with a debt problem. External loans and trade recession compounded this problem. Internal political divisions undermined any attempt to apply a consistent policy with regard to the far northern territories. When the crisis over Texas secession broke in 1835, Mexico was in no position to assert its sovereignty successfully in the face of resistance from Anglo-Saxon settlers.

Mexico became independent of metropolitan Spain in 1821 not as a republic but as the Mexican Empire, a monarchy which extended at

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least nominally from Panama in the south to Oregon in the north. Its capital, Mexico City, remained the largest city of the Americas and probably the most architecturally distinguished at that time. The Mexican silver peso or dollar remained one of the world's major denominations: the US dollar was based on the peso and the two currencies retained parity until the mid-nineteenth century. The Chinese Empire, perennially short of silver, used the peso as its principal medium of exchange until the turn of the century. In 1821, it did not seem inevitable that the Mexican Empire would lose a large part of its territory and after 1848 be surpassed and increasingly dwarfed by the United States of America.

Defeat in the War with the United States (1846–48) at a time of internal division meant that an international border was drawn through what had formerly been claimed as part of Hispanic North America. After 1846, Mexicans in territories that fell under US occupation frequently became second-class citizens in what had been their own country: pushed off their lands or confined to 'barrios', they faced discrimination in a variety of ways. Out of that experience sprang the Chicano movement from the 1960s which expressed itself in both culture and politics. While beset by its own historic ambiguities, the Chicano movement sought to reassert the authenticity and dignity of the Mexican experience (and its connection to Mexico) within the United States. At the same time, Mexican (and other Latin American) migrations into US cities altered their character and ultimately their political life. Chicago, the second largest Polish city in the world, acquired in recent decades a significant Mexican character as well, far beyond the traditional territories of the Hispanic orbit.

LIVING WITH THE USA

Mexico and the United States were products of the same historical epoch, the Age of Enlightenment and Revolution over the period from 1776 to 1826. Both became sovereign states as a result of revolutionary movements which overthrew European colonial regimes. Why are they so different and why has their relationship taken the course that it has? In Mexico, the Enlightenment, the Atlantic Revolutions, and nineteenth-century Liberalism encountered the inheritance of the Spanish Conquest, Hispanic absolutism, and the Counter-Reformation,

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all powerful counter-influences. None of them was disposed towards government by consultation and consent. Although both Mexico and the United States adopted federalism, the comparative study of how this functioned remains in its infancy. The question of why federalism broke down in Mexico in 1835–36, only a decade and a half after Independence, still generates controversy.

For Mexico, the unavoidable relationship with the United States has been the predominant element in external policy since the Texas War of 1836. For Mexicans, the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (1848), which confirmed the loss of the far north, continues to be a significant event. It confirmed the shift in the balance of power within the North American continent in favour of the United States. By contrast, the United States' perspectives are not those of Latin Americans in general, nor of Mexicans in particular. For the United States, the rest of the American continent is largely a sideshow at best and a nuisance factor at worst. As a twentieth-century world power, the principal focus of United States foreign policy was always Western and Central Europe, on the one hand, and the North Pacific Basin (Japan and China), on the other hand. Mediterranean, Middle Eastern, and South-East Asian affairs formed a necessary but secondary sphere. This is not to deny the significance of sporadic US attention to Caribbean or Latin American issues, but to affirm, nevertheless, its tertiary nature. This is not the place to debate whether these policy priorities have been the correct ones, given the American location of the United States. They do help to explain, though, why United States–Mexican relations – two countries which share the longest common border in Latin America – have remained so fraught with misunderstanding throughout the period from 1836 to the present.

From the vantage point of the United States, Mexico appears to be underdeveloped, potentially unstable, and even conceivably a security risk. The primacy of negative sentiments remains a striking feature of US perceptions of Mexico, which has not diminished but may even have increased during the 1990s through media attention to drug trafficking, human-rights abuses, and widespread corruption. Failure to eradicate these problems makes Mexico seem culpable across a wide span of US opinion. Mexican perceptions of the United States frequently tend to be equally, if not more, negative. The loss of the far north is the starting point, re-examined in full detail in a series of conferences in Mexico

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City and in regional capitals during the course of 1997–98, the 150th anniversary of the defeat. ‘What went wrong?’ was the question asked. In the United States, the anniversary, still overshadowed by the impact of its own Civil War (1861–65), passed with scarcely a murmur.

Any discussion in Mexico of the projected McLane-Ocampo Treaty of 1859 for US transit rights across Mexican territory reopens the rival nationalisms inherited from mid-nineteenth-century Liberals and Conservatives. Two landings of US forces in Veracruz, in 1847 and 1914, are usually commemorated in Mexico with nationalist excoriation of US treachery and violations of national sovereignty. Deep suspicion, frequently justified, characterised much of US–Mexican relations during the course of the twentieth century, right through to the establishment of the North American Free Trade Agreement in 1992. Yet, political and economic developments during the 1980s and 1990s emphasised all the more the interdependence of the two countries with a common border of 3,000 km. Even so, the significance of NAFTA still remains unclear, especially in view of the uneven development of the three participating states and their differing perceptions of the free trade treaty’s purpose. Since the treaty involved major concessions by the Mexican state to US private capital, intense warnings followed in Mexico concerning the dire social consequences. These forebodings seemed to be given reality with the outbreak of the Chiapas rebellion in January 1994, which threw the focus once again on long-standing indigenous grievances.

The NAFTA resulted from a Mexican initiative, to which the US government responded. Mexican motives were political as well as economic, and reflected internal circumstances as well as external goals. In that sense, the Mexican government was drawing the United States deeper into Mexican affairs, while at the same time expecting gains for Mexico in the US market. Any analysis of the relationship between the two countries needs to recognise not only US misinterpretations of Mexican conditions and misunderstanding of the language and local susceptibilities, but also the Mexican capacity for manipulation. How to ‘handle the Americans’ forms an essential part of Mexican foreign relations.

Fundamentally, the Mexican–US relationship involves disparities of wealth and power. These disparities are the crux of the issue. Mexico and the United States, despite parallels and similarities, operate in different worlds. Their international context and terms of reference are

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wide apart. Perhaps worst of all, the two countries are not really seriously thinking about one another. Mexico's obsession is with itself. Few Mexican newspapers or journals have any broad and profound coverage of international affairs, still less any informed analysis of US developments, except perhaps where the behaviour of the New York stock market is concerned. Enrique Krauze's comment that Mexico is symbolically an island is very much to the point. There are remarkably few Institutes of US Studies in Mexico and few historians specialise in US history. The Centro de Investigaciones sobre América del Norte, based at the UNAM in Mexico City, which also deals with Canada as its name implies, is a notable exception.

Although Mexico and the United States have still not managed to work out a satisfactory relationship after two centuries, not everything in this North American 'special relationship' has been a disaster. US Presidents usually meet more often with their Mexican counterparts than with any other Heads of State; there are annual meetings of US and Mexican Governors of border states. For the US President a certain international proportion is inevitably involved. In November 1997, for instance, President Ernesto Zedillo's visit to the White House followed in the wake of that of the Chinese President, Jiang Zemin (who subsequently visited Mexico). The two visits highlighted the dimensional difference between China and Mexico in terms of their ranking in US foreign policy considerations. Furthermore, the three decades of Mexican economic difficulties since 1970 cost the country a great deal in terms of its position on the US scale of world importance. Issues such as the border and drug trafficking were inevitably discussed between Zedillo and President Bill Clinton.

Mexico, unlike the United States, is neither a world power nor a significant military force. Mexican self-contemplation – looking into the mirror – effectively removes the country from any possibility of exercising influence in world affairs. While Mexico certainly has a strong and resilient culture, it shares with most of Latin America an inability to project itself in any significant capacity onto the world political stage. In that sense, Latin America represents a missing factor, a huge area in terms of territory and population, but without an influence on the course of events. Given the relationship to the USA, the image of Mexico is frequently one projected to the rest of the world through the medium of the United States. Accordingly, the image is rarely a favourable one.

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THE BORDER

The Mexican presence ‘north of the border’ helps to explain further the uneasy relationship between Mexico and the United States. The border issue, as it is seen inside the United States, continues to be an unresolved problem between the two countries. Even so, the border remains more political than cultural, in the sense that the ‘American South-West’ has never entirely superseded the Mexican far north. Quite the reverse, the growing Mexican impact in former territories such as Texas, Arizona, and California is evident to anyone who lives or travels there. A slow, persistent recovery of ‘Mex-America’ has been taking place beneath the political superimpositions of 1848. Some might even portray this as a ‘Reconquista’. For generations, families in northern Mexico have had relations across the ‘border’, and transit for one purpose or another has been constant. For many Mexican families in the border zone (regardless of which side) it is simply a formality that has to be passed through whenever meetings take place. Carlos Fuentes (b.1928) in *La frontera cristalina* (Mexico 1996) directly portrayed this experience in ten short stories that form a type of novel. Recent border novels by the US author Cormac McCarthy, such as *All the Pretty Horses* (New York 1992), gave a distinct Texan perspective to the frontier experience.

The border itself, in spite of the ongoing argument over illegal immigrants, is more a crossroads than a frontier. The string of twin cities – Calexico–Mexicali, Nogales (Arizona)–Nogales (Sonora), Douglas–Agua Prieta, El Paso–Ciudad Juárez, Eagle Pass–Piedras Negras, Laredo (Texas)–Nuevo Laredo (Tamaulipas), McAllen–Reynosa, Brownsville–Matamoros – gives an idea of the dimensions involved. Life in Monterrey (Nuevo León) is not radically different from life in San Antonio (Texas), and certainly a good deal more similar to it than to prevailing cultures in central Mexico. Even so, there are some striking distinctions on and beyond the frontier. San Diego, California, fourteen miles from the Mexican border, remains a characteristically US city oriented more towards the rest of the USA than southwards to Mexico, despite the large Mexican presence in the vicinity and in spite of the rhetoric of urban cooperation with Tijuana.

Immigration studies, strong in assessing European entry into the USA, Argentina, Uruguay, or Brazil, frequently overlook Latin American migration into the United States. Although many such immigrants may