

FUELING MEXICO

Around the 1830s, parts of Mexico began industrializing using water and wood. By the 1880s, this model faced a growing energy and ecological bottleneck. By the 1950s, fossil fuels powered most of Mexico's economy and society. Looking to the north and across the Atlantic, late nineteenth-century officials and elites concluded that fossil fuels would solve Mexico's energy problem and Mexican industry began introducing coal. But limited domestic deposits and high costs meant that coal never became king in Mexico. Oil instead became the favored fuel for manufacture, transport, and electricity generation. This shift, however, created a paradox of perennial scarcity amidst energy abundance: every new influx of fossil energy led to increased demand. Germán Vergara shows how the decision to power the country's economy with fossil fuels locked Mexico into a cycle of endless, fossil-fueled growth – with serious environmental and social consequences.

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Energy and Environment, 1850–1950

GERMÁN VERGARA

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Acknowledgments

I like to think that this book, while clearly academic, is also a personal story. I was born and raised in Mexico City. On many occasions, as I sat down to write (and rewrite) it, I recalled my teenage impressions of the place – of its enormity, its beauty and ugliness. At eighteen, I used to climb to the rooftop of the tall apartment building where my family lived and look out on the city. On clear days, when rain and wind dissipated the brown smog that typically blanketed the Valley of Mexico, I could see the vastness of the city extending all the way to the foothills of the mountain ranges in the southwest. It never ceased to amaze me, this juxtaposition between endless “asphalt jungle” and verdant foothills and sierras. Looking back, I’m left to wonder how much of my academic work was influenced by the conflicting awe and alarm I felt looking out over Mexico City. Years later, after living in Europe and in different parts of the U.S., I found myself coming back to similar questions about my hometown. How had modern Mexico City – and modern Mexico – come to be? Why had it changed so dramatically from the time my parents were young to my own youth? Could a city of such proportions continue to exist in its present form long-term? How could those forests survive next to one of the biggest cities in the world? This book represents my answer to these questions.

But no matter how personal its origins, writing a book requires the support and collaboration of many people. The relationship between the author and this larger group is not unlike that between passengers on a train: a few people will make the entire trip with you, while others hop on or off along the way. It can be a solitary journey at times, but one is rarely ever alone. Just as a train ride would be impossible without railway workers, stations, tracks, and power, writing a history book is hard to imagine without colleagues, a home institution, library and archival collections, and a network of family and friends. May these acknowledgments convey the gratitude I feel towards the people who joined me on this ride.

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