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978-1-316-62661-0 — A Concise History of Mexico 3rd Edition
Brian R. Hamnett
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Mexico in Perspective

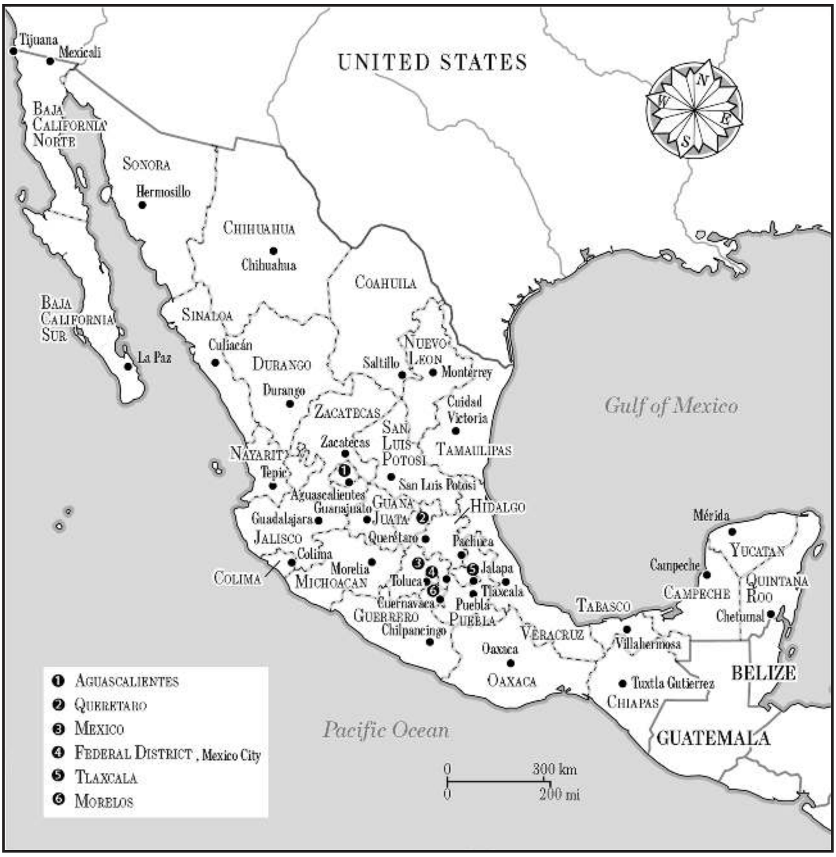
Mexico may form part of the 'New World,' in the European understanding of the term, but in reality, much of the territory included within the present-day Republic formed part of a very old world. Until the end of the fifteenth century and the first decades of the sixteenth century, this old world remained unknown to the inhabitants of other continents. Accordingly, we need to appreciate the diversity and long duration of this pre-Columbian past if we are to explain colonial and contemporary Mexico. This book's structure and the approach reflect that chronological and thematic sweep. The principal objective is to identify the overriding themes and issues, as the in-depth detail may be found in the wide-ranging and growing bibliography of Mexican history. I strongly recommend the reader to plunge into this rewarding subject matter.

Modern territorial boundaries, however, distort the cultural and political dimensions of the pre-Columbian world in Mesoamerica. The geographical dimension of Maya civilization, for example, included areas such as the Yucatán peninsula, which would become in Spanish-colonial times the south-eastern territories of the Viceroyalty of New Spain, established in 1535, and formed much of the northern sector of the Kingdom of Guatemala. Although Maya sites such as Palenque, Bonampak, and Yaxchilán are today located in the

Mexican State of Chiapas, this territory formed part of Guatemala until 1823. Classic Period Maya sites, such as Tikal and Copán, are located respectively in the present-day republics of Guatemala and Honduras. Knowledge of Maya civilization is disseminated today from the capital-city museums of these respective republics, particularly Mexico City, which at the time played no role whatever in its original flourishing. In that sense, the Maya and other pre-Columbian inheritances have been appropriated by the national states to reinforce their national identities, distinctiveness, and legitimacy. In short, the pre-Columbian world has been brought back to life, in order to serve a political purpose in the present day.

Two chronologically distinct processes have been at work since the collapse of the pre-Columbian world. First, the creation of a Spanish colonial political and economic system founded on different cultural principles was imposed upon the existing political and territorial units. Second, a Mexican national state has been constructed out of the former Viceroyalty of New Spain. In these two processes, discontinuities and continuities existed, sometimes incongruously, side by side. The radical difference but underlying persistence between contemporary Mexico and its pre-Columbian and colonial past make it imperative that we do not write history backward from the exclusive perspective of the present, but try to understand the past from within its own terms of reference.

Geography and environment help to explain the economic and political developments throughout this historical experience. Ethnic and linguistic diversities have combined with regional and local disparities to shape Mexican culture and define its distinctive culture. A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Veracruz
Tabasco
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Quintana Roo
Chetumal
Villahermosa
Oaxaca
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Tuxtla Gutierrez
Chiapas
Belize
Guatemala
Pacific Ocean
0 300 km
0 200 mi
❶ Aguascalientes
❷ Queretaro
❸ Mexico
❹ Federal District, Mexico City
❺ Tlaxcala
❻ Morelos

MAP 1.1 Contemporary Mexico

number of obvious contrasts spring to mind: the openness and dynamism of the north, the cultural and ethnic mixtures of the core zone from Zacatecas and San Luis Potosí to Oaxaca with its colonial cities and Baroque architecture, the Maya world of Yucatán and Chiapas, and, above all, the ceaseless pace of Mexico City, a cosmopolitan megalopolis bursting at the seams. Federalism, first adopted in 1824, and again in 1857 and 1917, was a

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reflection of this diversity and an attempt to give institutional life to the changing relationships between province and centre, locality and province, between the provinces themselves, and between presidential power, the legislature, the judiciary, the state governments, and the municipalities. Much of Mexican history from the nineteenth century onward has seen the playing-out of these respective tensions in search of a workable balance.

Despite deep political divisions, economic difficulties, foreign interventions, revolutionary upheaval, and, in the contemporary period, the struggle against organised crime, the Mexican Republic has held together as a sovereign state. Even the spoliation of territory in 1846–8 or revolutionary civil war between 1910 and 1920 did not lead to its break-up. The strength and richness of the Spanish language and the survival of indigenous languages help to account for the country's resilience and distinctiveness.

Sovereignty, Territory, and National Sentiment

The Spanish colonial era took Mexican territory much further northward than the limits of the Aztec Empire, which it had superseded in 1521. In contrast to Peru, where the newly founded Spanish capital, Lima, lay near the coast but the Inca capital, Cuzco, had stood high in the southern Andes, the Spanish capital of New Spain had been placed right on top of the Aztec principal city of Tenochtitlán. Mexico City, before and after Independence, became the unchallenged dominant city, avoiding the polarities in Peru. Mexico City became the

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seat of the Audiencia of New Spain, the supreme judicial body, modelled on the Castilian prototype, although with major administrative faculties and political powers.

Effectively, the northern limits of the Aztec state reached the River Lerma, in the vicinity of San Juan del Río, just under a two-hour drive north of Mexico City. That line, however, did not signify the limits of settled culture. The Tarascan territory of Michoacán and the princedoms of present-day Jalisco existed beyond Aztec control. Furthermore, the sites of La Quemada and Altavista in the present-day State of Zacatecas testify to sedentary culture deep in these northward areas before their recovery by un-subdued, nomad tribes. Although the Aztec capital had fallen in 1521 and its dominant hierarchies removed, the rest of what would become the viceroyalty had to be conquered stage by stage over a long period after tenacious resistance through hitherto un-subdued territory. The Spanish reached northward into Pueblo Indian territory in present-day New Mexico and south-eastward into the tropical forests of Yucatán, Chiapas, and Guatemala. A prime motive for northward expansion was the discovery of rich silver deposits in the centre-north and north.

New Spain remained for three centuries an imperial subordinate to metropolitan Spain and a part of the broader Hispanic Monarchy. As such it was subject to the general requirements of the Spanish Empire, an essential part of the regular supply of precious metals. The Mexican silver peso or dollar remained a prized item of international trade until well into the nineteenth century, despite the lamentable condition of the Mexican economy for three-quarters of that century.

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The Spanish founded a chain of Hispanic cities in the aftermath of their conquests. Sometimes they were located, as new cities, in the heartlands of settled Indian areas, such as Puebla de los Angeles in 1531 and Guadalajara in 1542. Such cities became the centres of expansion for Hispanic culture among the surviving indigenous population. Cities like Guadalajara, Durango, and Zacatecas became the focal points for military expansion northward and for accompanying evagelization. Northward expansion ensured that the Viceroyalty of New Spain would consist of much more than the agglomeration of pre-Columbian polities. The Viceroyalty was subdivided into a number of 'kingdoms,' which were not distinct political entities but simply large administrative subdivisions: the principal of these was the Kingdom of New Galicia, with its capital in Guadalajara, seat of a Captain General, an Episcopal see, and the location of another Audiencia.

The Enlightenment, in particular, stressed the importance of rediscovering and conserving evidence of these pre-Columbian cultures. After Independence, this process continued but as part of the search for a distinct Mexican historical experience, that differentiated it from Europe and from the experience of other American countries. The foundation of the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (INAH) in 1939 represents a major advancement in the preservation and dissemination of that knowledge under the auspices of the modern state.

The makers of Mexican Independence, fought for in the years from 1810 to 1821, saw their country as the heir of both the Spanish viceroyalty and the pre-Columbian polities that had preceded it. The Mexican far north already extended into Upper California, New Mexico

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and Texas, territories which would be conquered by United States' armies in the War of 1846–8. Like much of the north, they were only loosely connected to Mexico City. The formation of the Commandancy-General of the Interior Provinces in 1776 had been an attempt to resolve the problem of defence from the raiding parties of un-subdued Indians, described as 'indios bárbaros,' who occupied much of the territory that was also claimed by Spain. The colonial government's reluctance or inability to finance a military solution ensured that the Mexican Republic would inherit this problem after 1824. When the crisis over Texas secession broke in 1835–6, the Mexican government, burdened by large-scale colonial and post-colonial debt, was in no position to successfully respond to the pressure from the growing number of Anglo-Saxon settlers pushing in from Louisiana and elsewhere.

For Mexican nationalists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the Aztec inheritance became fundamental to any understanding of nationhood. Independence, in their view, reversed and avenged the Conquest. The argument that Mexico existed as a nation before the Spanish Conquest was designed to undermine the legitimacy of Spanish rule. As such, Mexico had a cultural and political identity distinct from Europe and a moral right to defend its sovereignty. This idea provided a platform for resistance to the French Intervention of 1862–7, which sought to re-establish European dominance, although in a different form. Liberal President Benito Juárez (1806–72), who championed resistance, had been born a Zapotec in the southern State of Oaxaca. Nevertheless, he identified with Cuauhtémoc, the last Aztec ruler, whom the Conqueror, Hernán Cortés, had put to death. The victorious Liberals

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of the Reform era (1855–72) portrayed the execution of the Austrian Habsburg Archduke Maximilian, who had presided over the Second Mexican Empire of 1863–7, as both the second War of Independence and the vindication of the Aztec resistance to Maximilian's ancestor, the Habsburg Emperor Charles V, in whose name Cortés had annexed pre-Columbian Mexico to the Spanish Monarchy.

The Revolution of 1910–40 reaffirmed the symbolism of republican nationalism inherited from the nineteenth-century. It became an essential part of the ideology of the monopoly ruling party, which had taken its initial form as the Partido Nacional Revolucionario (PNR) in 1929. The Aztec myth reinforced the ideological position of the revolutionary state. In fact, Octavio Paz (1914–98), awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1990, argued that the Aztec pyramid was the paradigm of the monopoly party state, which predominated in Mexico from the 1930s to the 1990s.

The Federal Constitution of 1917 continued, in part, the Liberal tradition of the 1857 Federal Constitution, but also responded to social pressures from peasants and urban workers concerning the questions of landownership and the rights and conditions of labor. It also sought to assuage nationalist concerns that subsoil deposits, namely minerals, oil, and gas, should not be controlled by private companies based in foreign countries. This Constitution is still in force and its centenary was commemorated in 2017. Current needs to increase investment in the energy sector, in order to stimulate productivity and expand the sphere of exploitation, may lead to a modification of the Constitution's provision and to the state monopoly of petroleum established by nationalization in 1938.

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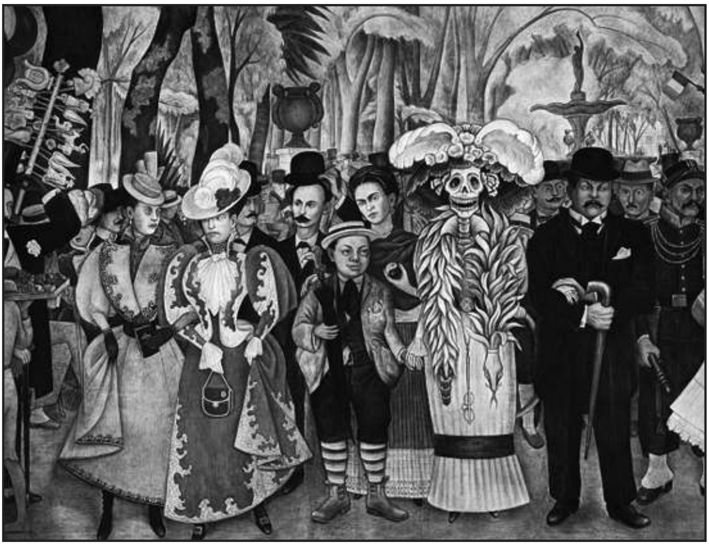

PLATE 1.1 Sunday Afternoon Dream in the Alameda (1947). This segment of the mural painted by Diego Rivera (1886–1957) in the Hotel Del Prado, Mexico City, focuses on the first revolutionary leader, Francisco Madero. The mural satirically portrays Mexican history over the previous hundred or so years. It was an extraordinary balance of design and colouring. In the mural are the artist as a young man with Frida Kahlo, his painter wife, José Martí, the Cuban nationalist, Porfirio Díaz, and the overdressed skeleton 'Caterina,' one of the satirist, José Guadalupe Posada's notorious *calaveras*. Rivera and other muralists of his generation such as José Clemente Orozco (1883–1949) and David Alfaro Siqueiros (1896–1974), aligned with the revolutionary left and rejected the colonial era and capitalism. They projected a radical, Mexican nationalism, and reshaped history accordingly. Rivera, in particular, asserted a continuity between Aztec culture and postrevolutionary Mexico. Although the 1985 earthquake damaged the hotel, the mural was saved and relocated in the Diego Rivera Museum at the western end of the Alameda in Mexico City (Courtesy of Getty, Image 640240238)

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Living with the United States

The loss of Texas in 1836 was followed by defeat in the War with the United States and the loss of nearly half of the Mexican Republic's claimed territory. The large numbers of indigenous Americans faced thereafter the US Army rather than the much weaker Mexican Army. Mexicans living north of the redrawn border henceforth became second-class citizens of a foreign power. Pushed off their land or confined to 'barrios,' they faced discrimination in a variety of ways. A Chicano movement would spring out of that experience during the 1960s, which would reaffirm the dignity inside the United States in both cultural and political terms. At the same time, substantial Mexican, other Latin American, and Caribbean migrations to the United States would alter the character of many cities, several of which, unlike Los Angeles or San Antonio, had never been Spanish-colonial or Mexican in the past.

By 1853, a new common border of 3,926 km cut across territory to the immediate south of San Diego down the Rio Grande Valley to the Gulf of Mexico at Matamoros, a vast area which had formerly been part of the same political entity. Ways of life often remained common, despite the linguistic difference on either side of the border. Loss of the Mexican Far North confirmed the shift in the balance of power on the North American subcontinent in favour of the United States. As this latter country grew in strength and influence in the decades following the Civil War of 1861–5, its perspective on the world differed widely from that of the Latin-American societies with which it shared the same continent. For the United States, the rest