

A Concise History of Mexico

BRIAN HAMNETT



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CONTENTS

<i>List of illustrations</i>	<i>page</i>	ix
<i>Preface</i>		xii
1 Mexico in perspective		1
Nationalism and territory		3
Living with the USA		7
The border		10
Drug trafficking		14
Indigenous Mexico		18
2 The pre-Columbian era		24
The Olmecs		24
Monte Albán and the Zapotec cultures of Oaxaca		28
The Mayas		32
Teotihuacan		36
The north		40
The time of troubles, 750–950		40
The Toltecs		41
The Post-Classic Maya		43
The Zapotecs and Mixtecs of the Post-Classic era		45
Central Mexico		47
The Aztecs		48
3 The European incursion, (1519–1620)		58
The impact of the fall of Tenochtitlán		59
The imposition of Christianity		64

Hispanic land acquisition	76
4 New Spain, 1620–1770: Spanish colonialism and American society	80
Spain and the Empire: merchants, financiers, and markets	81
Indian communities	90
New Spain's Baroque culture	92
The cult of the Virgin	102
The exposed north and far north	105
The political processes	108
5 Destabilisation and fragmentation, 1770–1867	112
Part one: the climax and collapse of New Spain, 1770–1821	115
Part two: the failures and successes of a newly sovereign state, 1821–1867	143
6 Reconstruction, 1867–1940	177
Part one: the Liberal republic: constitutionalism or personal rule, 1867–1911?	180
Part two: the revolutionary system: state power or democratisation, 1911–1940?	209
7 The monopoly party, 1940–2000	249
Part one: the 'Mexican miracle' and political control, 1940–1970	251
Part two: economic crises and political divisions, 1970–2000	272
Final comments	306
<i>Bibliography</i>	310
<i>Index</i>	316

ILLUSTRATIONS

plates

1. Visit to the border barriers at Tijuana by Secretary of Foreign Relations, Rosario Green	<i>page</i> 13
2. Federal Maximum Security Prison at Almoloya de Juárez (State of Mexico), near Toluca	17
3. Local market at Tlacolula, Valley of Oaxaca	20
4. Olmec sculpture from the Jalapa Anthropology Museum, Veracruz	26
5. Zapotec pyramid at Monte Albán, Valley of Oaxaca	30
6. Maya pyramid at Uxmal, Yucatán	35
7. Maya-Toltec pyramid at Chichén Itzá, Yucatán	44
8. Diego Rivera's mural, 'La gran Tenochtitlán' (1945)	52
9. Hernán Cortés and La Malinche	60
10. Titian's portrait of the Emperor Charles V	61
11. Detail from Cristóbal de Villalpando's painting of Mexico City's central square	94
12. 'La Dolorosa' by Cristóbal de Villalpando	96
13. Miguel Cabrera's study, 'The Virgin of Guadalupe with the three Juans'	99
14. Portrait of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz by Juan de Miranda	100
15. Basilica of the Virgin of Solitude, Oaxaca	103
16. Humboldt's map of the Viceroyalty of New Spain (detail)	114
17. Father Miguel Hidalgo	128

18. General view of the city of Valladolid de Michoacán (now Morelia)	130
19. Father José María Morelos	136
20. General Antonio López de Santa Anna	142
21. Entry of United States' forces into Mexico City, 14 September 1847	146
22. Benito Juárez	161
23. (a) The Emperor Maximilian in imperial robes	170
(b) The Empress Carlota in imperial robes	171
24. The young Porfirio Díaz	174
25. The Execution of Maximilian, 19 June 1867 (detail)	175
26. José María Velasco: two paintings of central Mexico	
(a) The volcano of Citlaltépetl (El Pico de Orizaba), Veracruz	182
(b) Hacienda de Chimalpa (1893), Valley of Mexico	183
27. The Monterrey Iron and Steel Plant of 1903	188
28. Porfirio Díaz in his prime	199
29. Diego Rivera's mural, 'Sunday Afternoon Dream in the Alameda' (1947)	203
30. Francisco I. Madero with Revolutionary generals, April 1911	210
31. Federal soldiers on campaign against revolutionaries in 1910–11	212
32. Venustiano Carranza	213
33. Pancho Villa and his wife	216
34. Villa and Zapata in the Presidential Palace, Mexico City	218
35. Zapatista soldiers at breakfast in Sanborn's 'House of Tiles', Mexico City	219
36. Álvaro Obregón with Plutarco Elías Calles and Adolfo de la Huerta	228
37. Plutarco Elías Calles and his second wife	229
38. Lázaro Cárdenas with President Manuel Ávila Camacho and Calles	236
39. Library of the National University (UNAM), Mexico City	252
40. Gustavo Díaz Ordaz with the Generals on Army Day, 1969	271

List of illustrations

xi

41. Cardinal-Archbishop Norberto Rivera Carrera washing feet on Holy Thursday	290
42. Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas takes office as Mayor of Mexico City in 1997	294
43. Tension in Agua Tinta, Chiapas, in 1998	297
44. Bishop Samuel Ruiz of San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapas, with kneeling clerics	298
45. The Mexico City Stock Exchange	301

maps

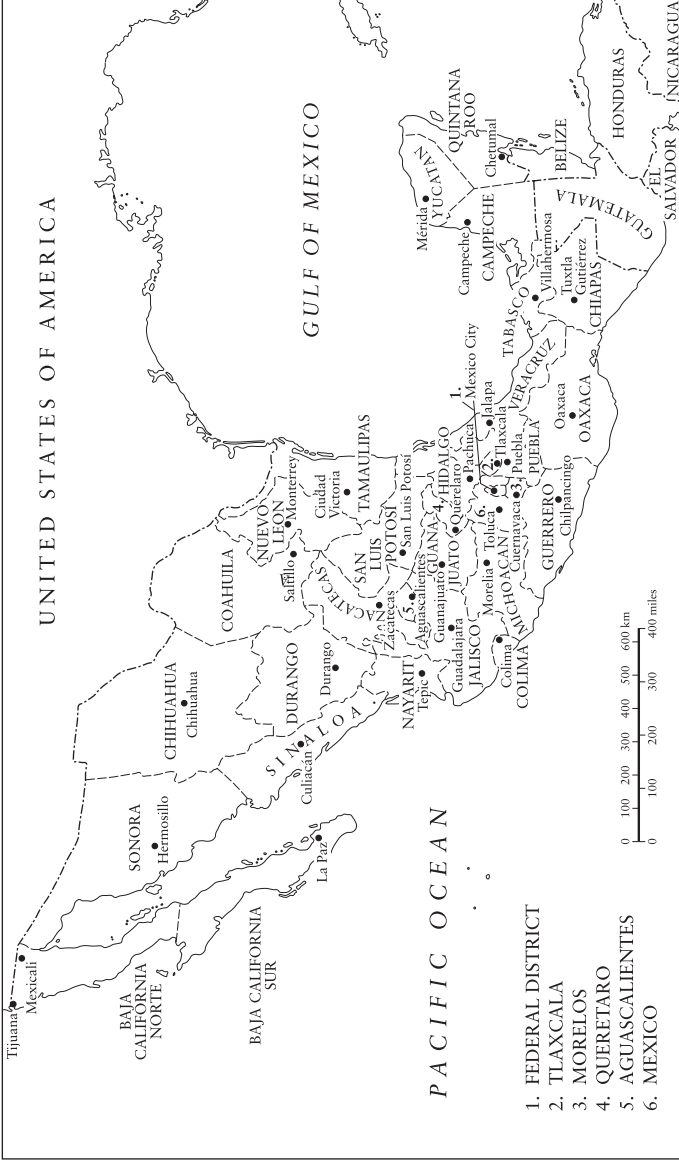
1. Modern Mexico at the turn of the millennium	2
2. The Maya world	33
3. Plan of the city of Teotihuacan	38
4. The Toltec-Aztec world	49
5. The Viceroyalty of New Spain in 1810	138
6. Territorial losses, 1836–53	152

1

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 presents a paradox of an ostensibly stable regime but a recrudescence of political assassinations and popular rebellions, along with globalisation but recurrent economic crises.

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,



Map 1 Modern Mexico at the turn of the millennium.

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 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 has 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 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. 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 Río 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 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, 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 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 re-opens 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, has 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 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. However, the Mexican President's visit was further marred on 10 November 1997 by Clinton's failure to persuade Congress to support his 'fast-track' option for the issue of trade liberalisation in accordance with the NAFTA. The explanation lay in Democratic Party fears of Mexican competition in the labour market. Since the South-East Asia financial crisis of late 1997 and early 1998, the 'fast-track' policy has died a quiet death.

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.

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 gener-

ations, 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 aspire to US citizenship and the benefits of US material life, Latin American culture is strong enough to resist absorption into prevailing English-language culture and most such immigrants would not wish to forfeit their distinct identities. Accordingly, the late twentieth-century reinforcement of the already existing Latin American historical presence within US-controlled territory has raised the question of cultural and linguistic integration. Along with the Mexican 'border question' is the issue of the status of the Spanish language within the United States in relation to the (at present) unique official status of the English language. This latter issue goes well beyond the question of the Mexican border,

since it involves at least the Cuban, Puerto Rican, and Central American presence in the United States as well. Mexicans, in view of their own cultural inheritance and the contiguity of the Mexican Republic, have proved to be the strongest group of 'unmeltables' within the United States.

Earlier migration resulted from Porfirian land policies and conditions during the Revolution in the 1910s. Much mid-century cross-border migration derived from the US *bracero* programme of 1942–64, which introduced the concept of the 'wet-back' to California and Texas popular culture. Failed agricultural reform policies in the aftermath of the Revolution led to the recreation of 'branches' of Mexican villages within the US cities themselves. Re-planted communities from Jalisco, Michoacán or Oaxaca, for instance, resemble the transplanted dissenter communities of seventeenth-century Essex and Suffolk which contributed so much to the establishment of New England, though they are rarely viewed through US eyes in the same perspective. In January 1998, Jalisco was reputed to be the Mexican state with the largest number of migrants: 1.5 million people originating from there lived in the United States, particularly in California, Chicago, and Washington DC. Migrants sent around US\$800 million back into the Jalisco economy.

The US Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986, which was considered in Mexico to be a response to Mexican Government independence on Central American issues, seemed to ignore the dependence of significant sectors of the US economy on Mexican labour. The first Clinton Administration, which took office in 1993, began another attempt in the following year to stem Mexican immigration by increasing the number of patrols and constructing more barriers, but four years later no one could tell whether it had been a success or not. Funding for frontier control increased from US\$374 million to US\$631 million between 1994 and 1997. Operation Hard-Line has been in force along the US southern border since 1995.

In the 'border question', the USA sees itself at its most vulnerable. A society formed of immigrants from other continents has been in the process of trying to seal the border with one of its two North American neighbours, though significantly not with the other. The incongruity of that situation – the attempted creation of a North



Plate 1 Visit to the border barriers at Tijuana by Secretary of Foreign Relations, Rosario Green, 9 December 1998. During the visit, the Secretary commented that the international border between the United States and Mexico appeared to be between two hostile countries. She stated that Mexico had so far failed to persuade the United States of a humanitarian policy, instead of the current situation in which potential migrants put their lives at risk in attempting night-crossings. The Secretary inspected the metal barrier constructed by the US authorities from the El Mirador Hill across the Tijuana beach and 50 m out into the sea to prevent Mexicans swimming into US territory. The Mexican press drew attention to the construction of a highway on the US side designed to strengthen Border Patrol responses to clandestine immigration. According to the Mexican Migrant Defence Coalition in San Diego, California, 141 'indocumentados' had died mainly from hypothermia and drowning in attempts to beat the US Border Patrol, which itself shot dead two potential migrants in the Tijuana area in September 1998.

Rosario Green, author of a work published in 1976 examining Mexico's external debt from 1940 to 1973, is a former Senator and deputy Foreign Minister, and was Ambassador in the Federal Republic of Germany in 1989.

American Berlin Wall when the European original had already collapsed – has had repercussions at many levels. It flies in the face of North American history as an immigrant society; it exposes yet again US failure to understand even the most basic facts about Mexico.

Immigration has become a political issue between the parties in US elections, with the result that short-term party advantage is allowed to prejudice US–Mexican relations. The topic is rarely accorded rational treatment, least of all in the US media. The US government invests huge sums in border restrictions, but, instead, dialogue at the border-state level on both sides of the frontier might prove to be a better way to resolving the issue. Mexican and US perspectives on the immigration issue differ radically at national level: Mexico sees immigration to the US (regardless of whether it is legal or illegal) as a necessary social and economic release; the US sees illegal immigration as a threat to living standards and a violation of national sovereignty. Both US and Mexican nationalism have repeatedly thrown obstacles in the way of any amicable resolution of the question. The widely differing living standards between the two societies remain at the heart of the problem.

drug trafficking

A prevailing issue between Mexico (and other Latin American countries) and the USA continues to be drug trafficking. The penetration of several Latin American countries' governmental, judicial and security systems by *narcotraficantes* has caused consternation among commentators. Even so, the prime explanation for the problem lies not in Latin America but in the United States. In early November 1997, a US Government Report stated that Americans spent an estimated US\$57,300 million on the purchase of illegal drugs during 1995. Of this sum, US\$38,000 million was spent on cocaine alone and a further US\$9,600 million on heroin. The same report stated that three-quarters of world cocaine production was destined for the United States. These figures help to put the Latin American situation into perspective. Early in 1998, the Director of the FBI argued before the Senate Intelligence Committee that the activities of Mexican drug cartels presented the

principal criminal threat to the United States. The Director of the Central Intelligence Agency held a similar view, arguing that divisions within the Mafia had enabled Mexican cartels to gain control of the international drug trade. The FBI identified seven large Mexican organisations which controlled distribution, and singled out the Tijuana cartel as the most dangerous, its alleged leader on its 'most-wanted' list. The controversial US Government policy of publicly categorising drug-risk sources led to strong opposition by its Mexican counterpart.

A joint US–Mexican anti-narcotics strategy has usually proved difficult to implement. Nevertheless, the US Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) operates inside Mexico in cooperation with the security services but the problem of supply in response to demand continues unabated and affects relations between the two countries. A newspaper report in December 1998 suggested at least 400 clandestine landing strips used in the drug trade in secluded parts of Baja California alone. Remote locations in Mexico have become areas of Marijuana cultivation, or provide air-strips for Colombian cartels to land cocaine destined for the US market by way of Mexican channels. In the Lacandonian Forest in Chiapas, such landing strips promote this clandestine trade, which accounts for around 60 per cent of the cocaine bound for the USA. US budget proposals for the fiscal year 1999 included the relatively small sum of US\$13 million towards anti-drug trafficking measures inside Mexico. The package put before the US Congress on 2 February 1998 earmarked a total of US\$17,000 million for anti-narcotics operations out of a total Federal budget of US\$173,000 million.

Perhaps the most serious problem which surfaced in Mexico during the 1980s and 1990s was the extent of the penetration of the political processes, armed forces, and security services by the drug cartels. The most notorious case involved a range of dubious activities by Raúl Salinas de Gortari, brother of ex-President Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988–94). Salinas was arrested on 28 February 1995 for alleged involvement in the assassination of the ex-President of the governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), José Francisco Ruiz Massieu, in late September 1994, and was confined to the Federal maximum security prison at Almoloya. The Swiss Government, late in 1997, revealed suspected 'money laundering'

by Salinas of over US\$100 million, embargoed since 1995, allegedly acquired through drug trafficking. His wife, Paulina Castanón, was arrested in November 1997, when she attempted to withdraw large sums from Swiss accounts. From exile in Ireland, Carlos Salinas, in November 1998 denied all knowledge of his elder brother's dealings. General Jesús Gutiérrez Rebollo, head of anti-drug-traffic operations, was arrested on 18 February 1997, for allegedly protecting one of the principal cartels. Gutiérrez, who was convicted of hoarding heavy-calibre weapons, had apparently collaborated in eliminating rival barons. He was sentenced in March 1998 to thirteen years in prison.

Newspapers regularly carry reports of suspected drug involvements by political figures such as state governors. On 23 January 1998, for instance, the Office of the Federal Prosecutor (Procuraduría General de la República) ordered the arrest of Flavio Romero de Velasco, Governor of Jalisco from 1977 to 1983 and three times federal deputy for Chapala, on the grounds that he had maintained contact, while in office and thereafter, with identified *narcotraficantes*. Romero governed at a time when 'Operación Condor' pushed the *narcos* out of the state of Sinaloa, where they had been entrenched, with the result that they became established in Jalisco. Although considered by some a possible President of the PRI in 1995, the party's National Executive Committee expelled him after his arrest and confinement in Almoloya, in order to ensure a cleaner public image. Romero's alleged contacts were Rigoberto Gaxiola Medina and Jorge Alberto Abrego Reyna (alias Gabriel Pineda Castro), wanted for fraud. The former was believed to have transferred money from the Cayman Islands to Mexico and used front accounts for money laundering. At the Mexican Government's request, the US DEA arrested Reyna in Phoenix, Arizona, late in January 1998, while attempting to withdraw one million dollars from a hotel bank. The PGR was also investigating the relationship of the Governor of Quintana Roo, Mario Villanueva Madrid, to the Ciudad Juárez cartel, allegedly operating in that state and receiving cocaine from Colombia.

The presence in Mexico in early April 1998 of Barry McCaffrey, the US 'anti-drug tsar', as the press called him, was expected to produce a further joint initiative in the campaign of both governments

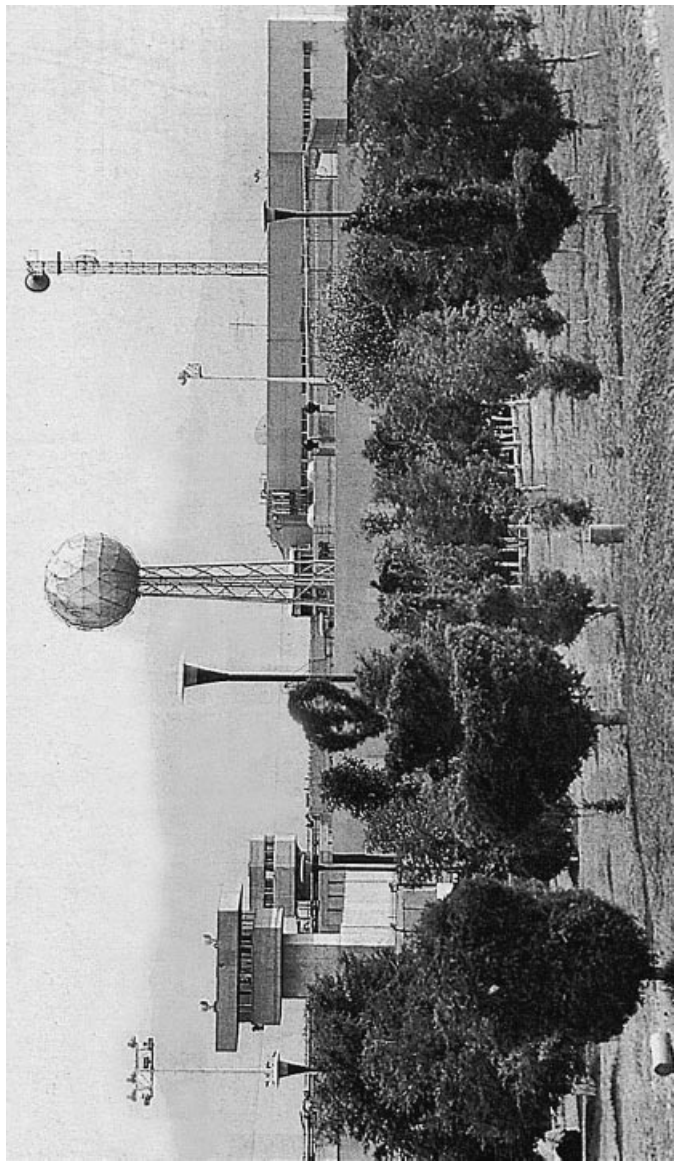


Plate 2 Federal Maximum Security Prison at Almoloya de Juárez (State of Mexico), near Toluca. Ex-President Carlos Salinas de Gortari's brother, Raúl Salinas, has been confined in the Almoloya prison since 1995. Also held there is Mario Aburto, apparently the assassin of PRJ presidential candidate Luis Donaldo Colosio, in Tijuana in March 1994.

to clip the power of the *narcotraficantes*. This problem, which came to the forefront after the 1970s, is one of the gravest faced by present-day Mexico. The recrudescence of the 'Indian question', linked to broader social and economic problems, presents a further, seemingly insoluble issue.

indigenous mexico

The pre-Columbian world, which we shall shortly examine, presented the European invaders of the early sixteenth century with the problem of understanding American societies of which they had no previous conception. Although the 'Indian' world changed radically under the impact of conquest, colonisation, and legislation, the Indian presence in contemporary Mexico remains real and pervading. No one reading newspapers or watching television news in the 1990s could escape the conclusion that contemporary Mexico faced an 'indigenous problem'. Although it is difficult to calculate with any accuracy the extent of the population component described as 'Indian', some estimates opt for a figure of around 10 million and argue that its annual rate of growth exceeds the national average of 2 per cent. Since the term 'Indian' in contemporary Mexico (particularly in urban areas) refers more to social position than to ethnic character, the basis of such calculations remains uncertain. Primary use of an indigenous language – there are estimated to be fifty-six linguistic groups – is frequently a criterion of inclusion. In Chiapas, for instance, the population described as 'Indian' represents about one million out of a total state population of 3.5 million. Of this million, around one-third speak no Spanish. The Chiapas issue, though not the first of its kind, has aroused international interest, in part due to human rights concerns but also to the fact that since January 1994, when the initial rebellion began, Mexican administrations have so far not discovered a solution to it.

The Indian question in present-day Mexico does not simply involve several districts in the state of Chiapas. It is far broader than that and has roots as least as old as those of Chiapas itself, and it is also an urban as well as a rural phenomenon. Internal migration during past decades has been motivated by adverse conditions on

the land – soil erosion, inadequate water-supply, failed land-reform policies, lack of credit, landlord abuses, domination by local bosses or *caciques* and their armed men. This has compounded problems of overpopulation in the metropolitan areas, most especially in Mexico City, with their large areas of shanty towns and inadequate sanitation.

The contemporary ferment in the state of Oaxaca, the complex pre-colonial history of which we shall look at in the next chapter, provides another major example of indigenous mobilisation. Although the state capital frequently presents a deceptive façade of colonial-era tranquillity, both the city and the countryside have been seedbeds of constant ferment over issues such as control of land and water, domination of local communities by armed bosses sometimes connected to the state and national political processes, labour conditions and unofficial unionisation, and the autonomy of municipal institutions. Frequent large-scale mobilisation by rural school-teachers and by local peasant groups has kept Oaxaca politics simmering for the past decades. The struggle for political supremacy within indigenous towns and villages has similarly provided a constant source of agitation. The violent conflicts in the southern Isthmus zone of Juchitán and Tehuantepec since the late 1960s clearly demonstrate the intensity of these issues. Many parallel conflicts have surfaced in other areas and at other times, lately in the states of Guerrero, Puebla, Tlaxcala, and Veracruz. During the early 1970s the Mexican army put down an insurrection in Guerrero, led by Lucio Cabañas, which attempted to connect district-level issues to wider political ideologies in an embracing military organisation. That model has provided an example for the entry of the EZLN ('Zapatista Army of National Liberation') into the Chiapas problem after 1983. The guerrilla band originated from the 'Fuerzas de Liberación Nacional' (FLN), founded in Monterrey in August 1969, in the aftermath of government repression of the Mexico City student protests in the previous year.

The following chapters refer to a range of factors altering the demographic and cultural balance within Mexico since the early sixteenth century to the disadvantage of the indigenous population. These factors raise the question: if the Indian population collapsed so drastically in the aftermath of the Spanish Conquest, then why is



Plate 3 Local market in Tlacolula, Valley of Oaxaca. 'Indian' Mexico has always been characterised by networks of markets, some specialising in local produce such as the textiles of Teotitlan del Valle, the glazed green pottery of Atzompa, or the black pottery of San Bartolo Coyotepec, all three villages in the Valley of Oaxaca. The market of Tlacolula, one of the main valley towns, existed during the colonial period and was probably of pre-Columbian origin. It was an important market for the sierra villages as well. Periodic markets are usually known by the Náhuatl term, *tianguis*, while fixed markets take the Spanish term, *mercado*. Urban markets, covered and uncovered, proliferate, not least in Mexico City.

there an Indian problem in contemporary Mexico? A number of answers rapidly spring to mind: Spanish colonial policy never intended to eliminate the indigenous population but to offer protection in the disastrous aftermath of conquest; colonial law reconstituted and safeguarded (where practicable) Indian community institutions, including landownership; weak nineteenth-century governments largely failed to transform Indian peasants into individual smallholders; the neo-indigenist tradition in the Mexican Revolution pressed for re-establishment of community landownership and the provision of credit for peasant farmers. Above all, there is the factor of Indian population recovery from the late seventeenth