



SYNTHESES OF MEXICAN HISTORY: 'THE U. S. WRITERS

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Any examination of Mexican historical syntheses produced by United States scholars ought properly to begin with an explanation of the term. For a work to qualify under the rubric of a synthesis it must, in my opinion, provide a view, at once systematic and balanced, of Mexico's entire history from pre-conquest times down to the present, or at the very least examine the unfolding of that history from the onset of the independence movement to the time of writing. A work that focuses on the Porfiriato or on the 20th century Revolution no matter how broadly defined does not constitute a synthesis of Mexican history. Moreover, while articles have sometimes presented a birdseye view of that history, the concern of this paper is with the more substantial works, the one-volume or multi-volume studies of Mexican history.

Under this definition it becomes immediately apparent that syntheses of Mexican history are rare if not exactly exotic things. While our colleagues who teach United States, British, or even Russian history have bookcases that groan under the weight of the numerous syntheses that pour from the presses on their respective fields, those of us interested in Mexican history are confronted by a condition of scarcity. Indeed, if all the syntheses published originally in English since 1880 were put together, they would scarcely fill a single bookshelf. Even with the addition of translations—and in this regard the recent appearance of Justo Sierra's *Evolución política del pueblo mexicano* is a cause for rejoicing the situation would not be much better.¹ By any reckoning, there are not more than a dozen titles that fall under our designation, and not all of these merit extended discussion.

The first serious attempt to provide a general view of Mexican history in English dates from the 1880's when the businessman-historian, Hubert H. Bancroft, devoted to that task six of the thirty-nine volumes that comprise his *Works*.² To be sure, the northern regions of Mexico were treated in detail in two other volumes, and the Indian cultures in his "Native Races", but it is to his six-volume *History of Mexico* that one must look for systematic coverage of events

¹ Justo Sierra, *The political Evolution of the mexican People* (Austin, 1969). Tr. by Charles Ramsdell. This is actually the second English translation, the first having appeared, in mangled prose, in Justo Sierra, ed., *Mexico, Its Social Evolution* (2 vols. in 3, Mexico, 1900-1904).

² H. H. Bancroft, *Works* (39 vols., San Francisco, 1882-1890).

from the era of the conquest to the Díaz regime.³ Bancroft of course did not write these works alone—it was a collective enterprise for which he, improperly, took too much credit, but the net result was a monumental study that still retains value today and probably will continue to be useful a century after publication.⁴

The reasons for this are to be found in the very nature of the work. While Bancroft reflected very much the values of his times—he was a successful businessman, a California pioneer, an admirer of Porfirio Díaz—his aim was not to try to moralize from history or set forth a theory of human development, but rather to provide, as he phrased it, “a clear and concise statement of facts bearing upon the welfare of the human race in regard to men and events, leaving the reader to make his own deductions and form his own opinions”.⁵ To achieve this aim, Bancroft kept five men employed for ten years just in making references.⁶ As a result, this 5000-page *History of Mexico* is a mine of information and the bibliographic references alone guarantee continued consultation by serious scholars. Other attractive features are its balanced treatment of the major periods of Mexican history and the vigorous style in which much of it was written. Its inadequacies are partly those that are the inevitable product of the passage of time, partly those inherent in the work itself. It is strictly a political history despite the mass of data of an economic and social nature offered up to the reader in undigested fashion in the last seven chapters. Moreover, for all of Bancroft’s boast that he and his staff consulted 10,000 authorities, this history rests primarily on printed sources, thus permitting future scholars to amend or elaborate on its story through the exploitation of archival materials.⁷ But despite all that might be said against it, Hubert H. Bancroft’s *History of Mexico* is a unique work. No other U. S. historian, or group of historians, has as yet undertaken to produce a work of comparable scope and one is left to wonder whether the conditions that govern the publishing industry in the United States will ever again permit the appearance of a multi-volume general history of Mexico.

³ Bancroft planned his *Works* so that each component series would have its own numeration. The volumes of interest here are: *Native Races of the Pacific States* (5 vols., New York, 1874-1875); *History of Mexico* (6 vols., San Francisco, 1883-1888); *History of the North Mexican States and Texas* (2 vols., San Francisco, 1884-1889).

⁴ The best assessment of Bancroft is John W. Caughey, *Hubert Howe Bancroft: Historian of the West* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1946). See especially pp.253-277. Bancroft’s own account of his labors is set forth in his *Literary Industries* (New York, 1891). See especially pp. 134-167, 330-348.

⁵ Reproduced in Caughey, opp. p. 385.

⁶ Bancroft, *Literary Industries*, p. 321.

⁷ *Ibid.*; Caughey, p. 169.

The one-volume format, brief enough neither to exhaust the general reader nor to exceed the patience of the undergraduate student, has been the characteristic feature of the syntheses that have appeared in the U. S. since Bancroft's time. Hardly worth mentioning is Arthur Noll's *A Short History of Mexico* issued in 1890, except to say that he was moved to write it because of his own ignorance of Bancroft's work. "If any comprehensive history of Mexico exists in the English language", he wrote in March 1890, two years after the appearance of the last of Bancroft's six volumes, "its name fails to appear in any of the long lists of books on Mexico which the present writer has diligently searched".⁸ Without bibliography or notes, his work nevertheless satisfied a temporary need and can safely be relegated to the obscurity it has since enjoyed. The same may be said of the one-volume *History of Mexico* which Bancroft himself brought out in 1914, a reissue in expanded form of his *Popular History of the Mexican People* originally published in 1887.

The early 1920's saw the appearance of the first synthesis written by a professional historian, Herbert I. Priestley's *The Mexican Nation, A History*.⁹ Issued originally in 1923 and reprinted without change as late as 1935, it constituted for almost two decades the standard text in those few colleges which offered courses devoted to Mexico.

Although Priestley wrote it shortly after the First World War and following a decade of revolutionary violence in the neighboring country, it was less these events than his training as a colonial historian that appears to have influenced his format and approach. Practically half the volume was taken up with the colonial experience, but here Priestley avoided the temptation, to which other synthesizers have succumbed, of dwelling at length on the exploits of Cortés and his generation.¹⁰ It was with the introduction and development of institutions, political, social, and economic, but especially political that Priestley was mainly concerned, for he saw Mexico's troubled history after independence and even down to his own day as an outgrowth of a rich but defective Spanish inheritance, in which personalism, autocratic rule, and class struggle were baneful influences.¹¹

Writing for a U.S. audience, Priestley embraced to a certain extent the Greater American concept made famous later by his California colleague, Bolton. This is seen especially in Priestley's interpretation of the breakdown of the Spanish mercantilist empire and the beginnings of independence. In dealing with the 19th century, he likens Gómez

⁸ Arthur H. Noll, *A Short History of Mexico* (Chicago, 1890), p. v.

⁹ H. I. Priestley, *The Mexican Nation, A History* (New York, 1923).

¹⁰ Of the 455 pages of text, 205 are devoted to the period before 1810 and of these only 14 are used to discuss the exploration and occupation of the mainland.

¹¹ Priestley, p. xiii.

Fariás to an Andrew Jackson, seeing him as the personification of the rise of a new group and likens Juárez to Lincoln as defenders of national integrity. Priestley stops short of pushing these analogies, for he is well aware of the distinctive cultural patterns of the two countries.¹²

Writing as he did in the early 1920's Priestley reveals a remarkable indifference to the *indigenista* spirit that had been generated by the Revolution, a spirit that was being reflected in art, archaeology, and other ways even as his book appeared. The Revolution to Priestley, insofar as it had social significance, revolved around the mestizo, not the Indian.¹³ Indeed, as he saw it, "The progress of the mestizo type has been the cause and effect of the three great revolutionary movements which have marked the trend of Mexican history during the past century and a quarter".¹⁴

As stated earlier, Priestley's chief preoccupation was with political development. He himself firmly believed that Mexico needed strong centralized government in which the balance of power lay with the executive rather than the legislature.¹⁵ His book accordingly devoted considerable attention to the various constitutions devised for Mexico, and to an analysis of their strengths and weaknesses. No apologist for autocracy, however, he had only condemnation for militarist adventurers whether in the 19th or 20th centuries. His heroes, as one might expect, are Hidalgo, Morelos and Juárez. He acknowledged Díaz' extraordinary achievement in bringing stability and material progress to Mexico, but condemns him for halting Mexico's political development and for making Mexico an economic colony of the United States. "The ambitions of Díaz for his people", Priestley observed, "were excellent, benevolent and laudable whatever may be said of his egotism, his selfishness, his overwhelming lust for power. Neither he nor his enthusiastic admirers ever caught an inkling of the crime he committed. But his success was transitory because he set personal ambition against the trend of his country's history ever since independence by denying it the political evolution which had barely begun at the fall of Maximilian".¹⁶ With this judgement one may still agree or at least until such time as Daniel Cosío Villegas brings out his long-awaited volume on the Porfirian era.

Priestley's treatment of the Revolution of 1910 is extremely weak,

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. xi-xiv.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 125-126.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

¹⁵ As he saw it (p. 262); "The Mexican system of government, to be successful, must be strongly centralized until political experience and judgment become more nearly universal than they are today."

¹⁶ Priestley, p. xv.

understandably perhaps since he was writing at a time when its main thrust was difficult to discern amidst the resurgence of militarized politics and political violence. But Priestley also reveals a social conservatism that blinded him to the need for, and significance of, land reform. It is curious to note that this book, published in 1923, has but few references to Zapata as a military leader, and makes no mention whatsoever of the Plan of Ayala.

Priestley's narrowly political approach combined with his failure to update his text despite a third printing in 1935 created a need for a new synthesis that would take the reader beyond Carranza's ouster, one that could provide insight into the Revolution as a continuing phenomenon. The challenge to prepare such a work was taken up by another professional historian, Henry B. Parkes. Before examining in any detail his one-volume synthesis, which appeared in 1938, note should be taken of two works that had appeared in the intervening years, Ernest Gruening's *Mexico and Its Heritage* (New York, 1928) and Frank Tannenbaum's *Peace By Revolution: An Interpretation of Mexico* (New York, 1933).

Neither of these works provides a balanced view of Mexican history, and strictly speaking neither constitutes a synthesis under the definition used in this paper, but each one has been widely read and each has had considerable influence in shaping the views of many Northamericans toward the Revolution. Neither writer it should be noted was trained as a professional historian. Gruening went to Mexico in 1922 as a journalist for Collier's magazine and, having convinced himself of the inadequacy of existing explanations of the Revolution as well as of a simply political approach, he devoted the next six years to producing the massive tome that has been constantly cited ever since. The work contains an introductory historical summary down to 1910 and a chapter on the Revolution through 1927, but it is the thematic chapters with their wealth of detail on the Obregón-Calles period that have had greatest impact. Gruening's practice of quoting extensively from primary sources and of citing his authorities has given his book a weight transcending that usually assigned to journalistic efforts. Still Gruening never thought of himself as a historian and his sole interest in exploring the past was to indentify that which he felt would enlighten the present. Relevance was his watchword as it is today of a new student generation.¹⁷

Tannenbaum's *Peace by Revolution*, published a few years after the

¹⁷ Gruening's insistence on relevance is seen in his opening chapter, in his flat dismissal of the years 1825-1850, when he wrote (p. 51): "The history of this period is wholly unimportant except as it reveals the extent of national weaknesses and thereby sheds light on some of the paradoxes of contemporary Mexico."

appearance of his study on the agrarian situation,¹⁸ was devoted primarily to an examination of the Revolution of 1910, particularly to its social aspects. The first third of his volume, however, presented an interpretation of Mexican history from the Spanish conquest onward that should at least be mentioned here. In its original edition, and in the new paperback edition issued in 1966, it has brought its particular version of Mexican history to a wide array of readers. With Tannenbaum sociology invaded history, the sweeping generalization replacing narrative chronological reconstruction. Because of the author's literary flair and also his determination to avoid jargon, the reader emerges with a sense of excitement, as mountains of fact are swept aside magically to reveal fundamental processes presented as enduring truths.

In *Peace by Revolution* Tannenbaum offered his American readership an *indigenista* interpretation of Mexican history. The Revolution was presented as the last stage in a 400-year struggle to destroy the consequences of the Spanish Conquest. The Indian, long suppressed by a white minority, was now emerging triumphant. Biologically the white man was disappearing. "Mexico is returning to the children of the Indian mother", he wrote, "and will be colored largely by her blood and her cultural patterns".¹⁹ In this final stage, the *hacienda*, the last surviving major institution of oppression implanted by the Spaniards, was under attack. Arrayed against it was the Indian village which had resisted all attempts at domination or assimilation. It was to the village that Tannenbaum, in 1933, looked for the strength and moral purpose that could bring about a peaceful reconstruction of the country even as he viewed the Indians as "the rock upon which the future civilization and culture of Mexico has to be built".²⁰ There was a simplicity and beauty to his prescription for the future, undoubtedly a reflection of his passionate commitment to rural Mexico. Time and the perversity of man, if one can so designate the population explosion, urbanization and industrialization, have frustrated its fulfillment.

The year 1938 saw the appearance of Henry B. Parkes' *A History of Mexico*. Parkes, it might be noted, was not a specialist in this field. An Englishman trained to be an historian of the United States, his venture into Mexico was a temporary diversion from his usual interests.

Parkes' volume, as suggested earlier, supplanted Priestley's as the principal text used in the colleges. A comparison with the earlier work reveals it to be similar in format but written with greater attention to the dramatic and in a far more lively style. In Parkes' work the Conquest occupies much greater space at the expense of colonial political history. The seventeenth century, except for brief reference to aes-

¹⁸ *The Mexican Agrarian Revolution* (New York, 1929).

¹⁹ *Peace By Revolution*, pp. 6, 21-23.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 181-182.

thetic achievements, disappears from view. Another difference is Parkes' concern with national characteristics. Here as elsewhere he was not afraid to state his views.

What gave his volume a special attraction was his use of the present, that is the Mexico of the 1920's and 30's, to illuminate the past. Sensitive to the changes brought by the Revolution and especially the recognition given to the Indian and Indian culture, Parkes, whether dealing with the Conquest, or the growth of colonial society, or the liberalism of the nineteenth century, directed his readers' attention to the contemporary scene. The failures of the past were contrasted with achievement of the Revolution in giving Mexico a sense of national purpose and in instilling the rural masses with a new confidence in their future.

The air of immediacy with which Parkes was able to endow the past gave his volume great appeal. But it was the immediacy of the 1930's and with the passage of time the volume inevitably lost its freshness. To be sure, in subsequent editions, the last of which came out in 1960, the author added chapters at the end and tinkered here and there with the text; but it is still essentially a book written a generation ago in the atmosphere of the Cárdenas revolution in Mexico and the New Deal in the U.S., and on the basis of a bibliography long out of date.²¹

From 1938 to 1968, although many volumes were published in the United States on various aspects of Mexican history, there was not a single book that attempted to exploit the rising tide of monographs, biographies and special studies to produce a fresh synthesis. To be sure, many important works appeared, some representing years of labor, but they were all devoted to the parts and not to the whole. One need only mention Cook and Borah's studies of colonial demography, Gibson's work on the Valley of Mexico, or the writings of Cline, Quirk, Cumberland, Ross, and more recently Wilkie, on Mexico after 1910.²²

²¹ Except for an addendum of nine titles under the heading "Modern Mexico", the Bibliography contains nothing published after 1948. None of the monographs produced by U.S. scholars in the 1950's to say nothing of the early volumes of the *Historia moderna de México* receive any mention.

²² Sherburne F. Cook and Woodrow Borah, *The Population of Central Mexico in 1548: An Analysis of the Suma de visitas de pueblos* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1960); *The Indian Population of Central Mexico, 9531-1610* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1960); *The Aboriginal Population of Central Mexico on the Eve of the Spanish Conquest* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1963; Charles Gibson, *The Aztecs under Spanish Rule* (Stanford, 1964); H. F. Cline, *The United States and Mexico* (Cambridge, 1953); also his *Mexico: Revolution to Evolution, 1940-1960* (London, New York and Toronto, 1962); Robert E. Quirk, *The Mexican Revolution 1914-1915* (Bloomington, 1960); Charles C. Cumberland, *The Mexican Revolution: Genesis Under Madero* (Austin, 1952); Stanley R. Ross, *Francisco I. Madero, Apostle of Mexican Democracy* (New York, 1955);

The reader interested in Mexico and hoping to find the results of the latest research synthesized in a single work had no place to go. The closest substitute was a modest-sized volume whose author made no claim for it as a history of Mexico, but rather presented it as a "work of exposition and digestion", one in which he limited himself, as he put it, to a "discussion of such institutions, of such habits of life and thought, and of the lives of such men as, in my opinion have left the deepest impress on the country".²³ With these words Leslie Byrd Simpson launched the first edition of his *Many Mexicos* in 1941. Three more editions have since appeared, the latest in 1966, of what is probably the most widely-read general work on Mexico in the United States. With each edition, Simpson has added to the original text, especially in the third and fourth editions in which he elaborated on his earlier presentation and added occasional notes and a selected reading list of standard works in English.

Simpson's predilection for the Spanish period is clearly revealed in this work. Indeed, as he indicated in the preface to the first edition, he intended this book to serve as a corrective to existing treatments which failed to show sufficient appreciation of the positive features of the Spanish administration.²⁴ The result is seen in the allocation of space and in the very tone of the work. Almost 65% of the entire text of the 1941 edition was devoted to Mexico before 1810. Even in the expanded 1966 edition, which embodied another quarter century of contemporary experience, the chapters devoted to that earlier period still occupied 55% of the printed pages. It was not only quantitatively that Simpson showed his preferences. His treatment of the colonial era reveals a warmth of understanding, a genuine affection for the subject, like that of a parent who loves his children even when they misbehave. In contrast, he treats Mexico's history after 1810 like the proverbial stepchild. It is as if he regarded it as a distasteful matter about which the less said the better. Indeed, he disposes of the period 1821-1854 as if it were a comic opera not deserving of serious examination. In the 150 years after 1810 he finds few men of stature. Only Morelos and Juárez emerge with a full claim to our respect, where as the colonial era is peopled with a series of distinguished figures from Hernán Cortés to Revillagigedo.

The continuing appeal of *Many Mexicos* is a tribute to its style as well as to its content. Simpson enlivens his prose with extensive quotations from primary sources and by calling on his own experiences as

James W. Wilkie, *The Mexican Revolution: Federal Expenditure and Social Change Since 1910* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1967).

²³ Leslie B. Simpson, *Many Mexicos* 2nd. ed. (New York, 1946), "Preface to First Edition", p. xi.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

a visitor in Mexico. The anecdote, the satirical thrust, the apt choice of word ("the General Indian Court . . . for two hundred and thirty years acted as a shock absorber between the races of New Spain") all assist him in getting his message across. Whatever its weakness in interpretation and coverage, *Many Mexicos* has a special charm that assures it a permanent place in the literature on Mexico.

The year 1968 witnessed the appearance of the first completely new scholarly synthesis, since the first editions of Parkes and Simpson a generation before, in Charles C. Cumberland's *Mexico: The Struggle for Modernity* (New York, 1968).²⁵ Cumberland, whose earlier research focused on the twentieth century, explains his book as "an attempt to clarify and explain the special and economic issues which gave the Mexican Revolution such a distinctive stamp and to account for the direction and nature of the change".²⁶ Faithful to his stated purpose, Cumberland has produced a work with teleological overtones. Optimistic about the present and the future, he tends to deprecate the past. His chapter titles clearly reflect his approach. Under the title "Marking Time" he disposes of the entire period from the achievement of independence in 1821 to the rise of Díaz in 1876. The political drama of these years is not allowed to emerge; the Reform and Intervention are disposed of in a single paragraph. It is as if a mantle of gray were dropped over all the men whose conflicts over ideas and interests gave meaning to that period. His final chapter, entitled "At Last", reveals Cumberland's belief that Mexico has now reached the stage where it is able to achieve economic growth and at the same time deal justly with the aspirations of its people. The recent unrest in intellectual circles or the sense of disillusionment with the workings of the political system that is also a part of present day Mexico are not allowed to intrude.

It might be argued that as part of a series devoted to economic and social history, this volume necessarily had to be selective of its subject matter, and that neither political nor intellectual history was its main concern.²⁷ But such an argument serves only to strengthen the case for a new and broader synthesis than the one under discussion here.

²⁵ I pass over in silence Bishop Joseph Schlarman's polemical *Mexico: Land of Volcanoes* (Milwaukee, 1950) and Victor Alba's *The Mexicans* (New York, 1967). The latter is presented to the public as an English-language original and not a translation. Whatever its origin, it was apparently put together hastily and cannot be relied on for its factual information.

²⁶ Cumberland, *Mexico*, p. v.

²⁷ The dustcover description of the series (Oxford's Latin American Histories) states that the "books are general histories of Latin American countries which concentrate on social, economic, and cultural backgrounds, rather than on political figures and national wars". Cumberland's volume ignores the cultural dimension.

Within the limits set for himself, however, Cumberland has provided an excellent picture of economic and social conditions and their evolution over 450 years. A wealth of data is skilfully presented on topics that earlier synthesizers have tended to slight, topics such as Mexico's fiscal problems, the evolution of transportation, agricultural and industrial development. Even in treating such well-worn topics as the Church, landholding and labor conditions, Cumberland has something fresh to say. His discussion of the mining industry in the colonial economy and its vicissitudes since 1810 is outstanding. Thanks to this writer, the general reader in the U.S. now has access to some of the fruits of recent scholarship embodied in the numerous volumes published on both sides of the border over the past twenty years.

Cumberland's volume, as suggested above, does not foreclose the need for another synthesis. Rather it should serve as a stimulus for the preparation of a study that would be more comprehensive in its treatment, one that might take a comparative approach to the history of Mexico. Such a synthesis might very well be planned for two volumes, for it is apparent that 300-400 pages of text are inadequate to provide sufficiently detailed coverage of the various facets of Mexican history. Moreover, a two-volume approach would permit the collaboration of a colonialist and a modernist, each of whom might be able to convey to the other the empathy he feels for his own period.

It is not my intention to set forth here the prospectus for such a synthesis. As a student of nineteenth century Mexico, however, I would like to suggest that the experiences of the twentieth century and not just of Mexico can help us understand the difficulties that beset that country after independence. Mexico in 1821 was a new state confronted by the problems that other Latin American states had to face and not unlike those that recently emancipated areas in Africa and Asia are facing. As a new state, Mexico had to try to combine economic viability with institutional reform, and to seek political stability in the face of sharp internal differences over the direction and rate of change. That military men emerged as the dominant political force or that periods of anarchy alternated with dictatorship hardly seems surprising judged from the vantage point of the mid-20th century. The achievement of longterm stability on other than dictatorial terms for most states is the exception rather than the rule, and Mexico's 19th century experience should be seen in this light.

There are of course a number of key themes that can serve to provide a sense of unity to Mexican history over and above the more or less common thread found in Tannenbaum, Parkes and Cumberland: the enslavement for the masses by the Spanish, their long subjugation, and their eventual emergence through the violence of the Revolution.

With the passage of time, the significance of the Revolution as a permanent redemptive movement for the downtrodden is being increasingly questioned, and it would be well to cast about for other perspectives from which to examine the past. The future synthesizer might well consider using as a unifying theme the continuing quest for identity, the search for a national ethos. This would have implications not only for racial attitudes and relationships but also for inter-regional and ultimately international relationships. The conflict between regional and national interests is still another theme that links the uncertain present to the colonial past. Related to both the problem of identity and the issue of balance between center and periphery is the series of efforts to modernize the society. The roles played therein by the governing bureaucracies constitute a framework within which much of Mexico's history from the Bourbons to the present can be told.

Let me state, in conclusion, that the synthesizer for the U.S. reader should by no means ignore the work of his counterparts in Mexico. However, judging from the observations of my panel colleague on Mexican syntheses and from what we know of European efforts, the classic synthesis of Mexican history has yet to make its appearance in any language.