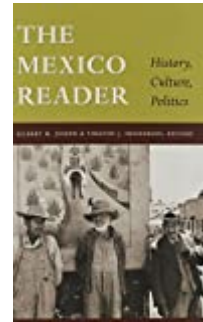




**Gilbert M. Joseph, Timothy J. Henderson, eds.** *The Mexico Reader: History, Culture, Politics*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002. xiii + 792 pp. \$25.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8223-3042-4; \$94.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8223-3006-6.



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**Published on** H-LatAm (July, 2005)

## A Big Book for a Big Country

Pity the poor undergraduate who has to carry this massive anthology of readings in Mexican history around in a backpack. At just under eight hundred pages, and weighing three pounds in paperback (compared to the average paperback at one or one and a half pounds), it is enormous, although the paperback edition is undoubtedly reasonably priced. On the other hand, one can envy the student who experiences this volume under the direction of a skilled classroom instructor who can bring its over eighty entries to life. It could be the foundation of an exciting course, particularly focusing on popular culture and society from pre-Columbian times to the present. You will not find a more varied or fearless introductory volume to Mexican studies.

Part of a series of similar books of readings on individual Latin American countries by Duke University Press, the volume is well presented, stoutly bound, filled with many black and white photographs, seven pages of acknowledgment of copyrights, brief suggestions for further reading in English, and, unfortunately, only one map. Many of the entries have been abridged. Translations are by the editors, and they are expertly done,

given the fact that many of the readings are vernacular or idiosyncratic. Translations of the more eccentric items convey their meaning clearly, but while they are not plodding, neither do they soar or capture the force of the original. The choice of texts and documents, and for that matter the whole direction and tone of the volume, reflects absolutely state of the art perceptions. I characterized the volume as fearless because it includes a number of readings describing brutal mistreatment of peasants and workers, political and social protest, and intense conflict, critical passages not normally included in anthologies.

The most impressive aspect of the volume is the variety of voices it reveals, readily substantiating the point that there were and are many Mexicos. Items include historical documents, formal and academic prose, informal prose, poetry, folklore, fiction, journalism, polemics, songs, political cartoons, memoirs, and satire. Each item, as well as each of the eight sections into which the volume is divided, is introduced by the editors with brief comments, which are particularly impressive for their succinctness and balanced tone. The breadth of selec-

tions is genuinely notable, providing at least a brief taste of the views of peasants and workers as well as elites, creole or indigenous, minority or majority, male or female. The approach is strongly critical, particularly for selections from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As the volume moves into the twentieth century, the selections become more varied and hard-hitting and some of them make startling reading. While the context is always based in political and economic processes, the choice of items indicates a strong preference for social history and popular culture, and a careful but unstated avoidance of the official story. While several items relate to the challenges and complexities of life in Mexico City, the regions are also well represented.

One can readily imagine a classroom instructor building a course in Mexican history around this volume. There is no attempt to foreclose individual interpretations, and the instructor could choose items or sections of the book for the class to read, augment some with others from elsewhere, and debate and discuss any selection. Endless topics for short and long papers could be based on the items in the volume. As long as a course dealt with Mexican history or culture, this volume would slot in well, though a more narrative-based survey would be necessary as well, unless the instructor was going to provide the narrative. There is no question this is a remarkable volume, likely to be considered the new high watermark of its type, and thoroughly modern in every sense.

Notwithstanding the remarkable strengths of the volume, there are concerns that can be expressed. While the

editors invariably discuss the origin or context of each selection in their introductory remarks, the reader has to refer to the long acknowledgment of copyrights to find the actual title and publication data of each item, and I counted two items that were not listed. This is clumsy for the teacher who wishes to know the original source and other details. The one map included is not sufficiently detailed, it does not give the name of any states, and it is for post-1848 Mexico only. Teachers who are not in the United States may find the volume oriented toward the U.S. audience, though not excessively so. (Come on publishers, there is an audience outside the United States.) Here, I am not complaining about section 8 of the book, which is focused on emigration across the northern border, because clearly that is a major part of the contemporary Mexican experience that needs to be included.

Overall, I wonder if many students will find the length and heft of this volume so off-putting that they will simply leave it on the bookstore shelf. Like it or not, my students do that often and it has to be a consideration in choosing books for course use. It is a fine problem to be sure: do you give a valid taste of the complexity of a country of such size and historical richness as Mexico, at the risk of scaring off students who are, shall we say, still uncommitted to Mexican history; or do you dumb it down in hopes of keeping their attention long enough to get them involved? An eternal quandary, although it is clear that editors Joseph and Henderson have opted for the more challenging approach that stronger students will find more satisfying.

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**Citation:** Timothy E. Anna. Review of Joseph, Gilbert M.; Henderson, Timothy J., eds., *The Mexico Reader: History, Culture, Politics*. H-LatAm, H-Net Reviews. July, 2005.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=10768>

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