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Floyd Merrell. *The Mexicans: A Sense of Culture.* Boulder: Westview Press, 2003. xi + 276 pp. $34.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8133-4044-9; $80.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8133-4043-2.

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On first reading, it is not clear what function this book was intended to perform. It is not history, it is not literature, it is not really even cultural or ethnic studies. It is presented as an introduction to Mexican culture for U.S. students (and only U.S. students), though it refers to few writers and barely mentions music, dance, art, architecture, or even television and the fotonovela. Rather, it tries to explain Mexicans and their society in terms of social norms and preferences, concentrating on interpersonal relationships and visible forms of interaction between people, classes, and ethnicities; in other words, behavior. It makes no claim to scholarship; but neither is it an introduction for the traveler. It is, rather, Octavio Paz and Samuel Ramos dumbed down for the hopelessly uninformed.

This quality of being neither one nor the other is, in fact, one of the primary points Merrell makes in his interpretation of all things Mexican. He drives it home with frequent and tedious repetition. Culture is process, and process is always changing, thus Mexican identity is always in flux. And this, briefly put, is Merrell's grand explanation. Although Merrell insists one cannot specify the essence (fixed nature) of the Mexican people, he spends many pages trying to delimit the unlimited. This national identity, Merrell argues, cannot be defined in terms of simple dualism, yet it always exhibits "contradictory complementarity." His definition of "contradictory complementarity" is actually more or less the same as his definition of Mexico: "it is a qualification of something as of *both* one nature *and* another nature, but at the same time as *neither* of one nature *nor* of the other nature, for it is always becoming something else" (p. 113). Exactly how an ill-informed undergraduate who cannot quite grasp the idea that different nations may have different personalities is supposed to comprehend such exquisite tautology is open to doubt.

But reality is much more complicated than this, for everything that is must also be continually becoming something else. For example, referring to the self in the Mexican mind: "the self is not a fixed commodity. Rather, it is always becoming something other than what it was becoming. It is flow, flow along with the flow of life and the life of culture, flow that flows to nowhere and nowhen in particular and to everywhere and everywhen in the most general sense" (p. 145). In a kind of summary of the existential riddle, Merrell, using the example of a mestiza woman, puts it this way: "When taking multiple possibilities into consideration, we must entertain the notion that culture is process, marvelous process. This notion plays havoc with the idea of a fixed identity. Within cultural flow, our mestiza, like all of us, *is*, and at the same time she *is not*, who she *was*, for she is always

becoming someone else, as she chooses, or chooses not to choose, along the stream of culture" (p. 150). First year students would have no difficulty with this, would they?

The book, thus, is more an extended essay of personal philosophical musings (many of which a North American reader could well accept) than a rigorous examination of the people and cultures of Mexico. Along the way, Merrell comments frequently on U.S. culture, often critically. While he professes great admiration for Mexicans, based on his marriage to a Mexican and long contact with the country, and although he insists that culture differences are neither good nor bad, the fact is that this book will be painful reading for Mexicans. I hesitate to say Mexicans would be insulted, because it very much depends on their own views, but some certainly could be.

The key to understanding the book, of course, is to note that Merrell is professor of Latin American literature and semiotic theory (at Purdue). That is, his specialty is semiotics, a general philosophical theory of signs and symbols that deals especially with their function in both artificially constructed and natural languages and comprises syntactics, semantics, and pragmatics. That is precisely what one gets in this book. Merrell explains, in his glossary of terms, that nonverbal communication, the shared, often unarticulated patterns of perception, conception, and communication, make up most of what we know as "culture." Under "culture" in the glossary, Merrell writes that:

"A culture is a complete form of life, a composite of an entire community's ways of living. It includes values, beliefs, esthetic standards, linguistic expressions, patterns of thinking, behavioral norms, and styles of communication that a group of people has developed to ensure its survival in a particular physical and human environment" (p. 244).

These definitions of Merrell's use of terms help a great deal in making his approach more concrete, lessinsubstantial; but they also tend to move the entire topic on to a realm of the non-empirical.

In other words, the book is a discussion of Mexican behavior as a symbolic language reflecting on culture and values. It is largely free of rigorous use of sources or scientific empiricism other than anecdote. By anecdote, I mean that the book gives pride of place to evidence the author himself has seen, people he has known, things he has experienced. Naturally, anecdote can be used as evidence, but it is usually not sufficient. And when it comes to symbols, where any one is as good as any other, the danger of random selection of specific characteristics over others is high. At any rate, the author does not actually explain all this to the reader in the text of the book itself. The primacy given to semiotics in the book's methodology may also account for the occasional minor errors in history or in the use of Spanish terms that appear throughout the book

Merrell's primary object is to urge his readers to overcome U.S. ethnocentrism and isolationism, and this is no doubt a desirable objective in the view of those who teach "area studies." The book seems to be as much a running social commentary on the United States as on Mexico. All comparisons are with the United States only. "In fact," he avers:

"the United States is slowly taking on the appearance of what we used to call the 'third world,' whether we know it or not and whether we like it or not.... If we wish to continue on in dreamy bliss under the assumption that we are the best and can ignore the rest, then a bleak future might be in store for us" (pp. 5-6).

The arguments and objectives of the book imply that one can save the United States by better comprehending Mexico, a mixed purpose to be sure.

The author claims to be surveying the history of Mexico as part of his presentation, but the use of history is very weak, citing few sources, and not hinting at any of the historiographical debates or theories that have so enriched modern Mexican scholarship. Most of the history here fails to rise above the level of cliche. Too often Merrell uses non-Mexican events or personalities drawn from other Latin American countries to illustrate a point about Mexico. He declares the name of the country to be "the United States of Mexico," one of those errors that U.S. citizens almost invariably make when referring to the country whose actual name is "the United Mexican States." He does this as part of an otherwise laudable effort to argue that any American country could call itself "America," a thundering revelation to U.S. citizens perhaps but not terribly helpful. The latter chapters, conceived in terms of Guillermo Bonfil Batalla's concept of "imaginary Mexico" and "Mexico profundo" (even if Merrell says he does not accept that dichotomy precisely), are the stronger chapters, primarily for their quick survey of contemporary Mexican issues. His suggestion that we are now in the era of a "virtual Mexico," a term that is not clearly defined, feels like pandering to current students to whom "virtual" appears to be a complimentary term.

Overall, Merrell's book is certainly not without its merits, but as philosophy, or perhaps as speculative theory, rather than as Mexican Studies. It suggests to the historian that defining culture in terms of national behavior is unconvincing. The best informed students would find this book intensely annoying, as will the instructor, while the least interested students will not be persuaded anyhow.

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