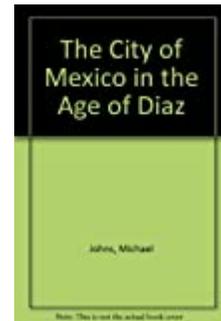


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Michael Johns. *The City of Mexico in the Age of Díaz.* Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997. 142 pp. \$14.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-292-74048-8; \$25.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-292-74047-1.



Reviewed by Robinson A. Herrera (Department of History, Florida State University)

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The time of Porfirio Díaz's rule, from 1876-1911, which is known as the Porfiriato, has recently gone through a profound reinterpretation. Long portrayed as a time of intense suffering for the majority of Mexico's rural and urban poor, scholars have begun to reassess Díaz's contributions to the infrastructure and industrial development of the country.[1] Attention too has been given to topics such as the society and culture of the Porfiriato.[2] Following in this vein Michael Johns, in his recent work *The City of Mexico in the Age of Díaz*, seeks to trace the spatial and societal changes that took place during the Porfiriato. While he makes a valiant attempt to condense the complex history of this sprawling urban center, ultimately the task proves too great. Much to the detriment of the work, Johns relies on the model of cultural imposition in his analysis and therefore gives almost no credit to native inhabitants who predated Spaniards. Furthermore his thesis that present-day Mexico City resulted not from earlier changes but rather from decisions made during the Porfiriato, is not entirely substantiated by the evidence presented in the book.

In its five compact chapters ("City and Nation," "East and West," "Peasants and Provincials," "Death and Disorder," and "Appearance and Reality") the work covers diverse topics such as the economy of the city and the arrival of rural migrants. As sources, Johns uses mostly

secondary works, although, to his credit, he displays cognizance of their strengths and weaknesses. To a lesser degree he also employs primary sources, mostly newspapers and travelers' accounts. Given the richness of mundane documentation such as testaments, land sales, and court records for the period under study, it seems puzzling why he would limit his use of the corpus of primary sources. Perhaps his training as a geographer might have something to do with this.[3] Given the nature of the sources employed, the institutional nature of the book comes as no surprise. He is interested far more in the formal and articulated elements of Mexico City than he is with common daily activities.

Johns does a fine job of covering topics in an introductory way, but he hardly ever provides analysis and thus closely follows the narrative format. In one subsection, titled "The Look of Europe in the Streets of Mexico," he describes the influence of French architecture and culture on the city's elite population. Yet he never addresses fundamental questions, such as why did the Mexican upper classes imitate France? Why not England? This proves particularly relevant in light of France's attempted incorporation of Mexico into its empire. If one knows Mexican history well, then a variety of reasons for this preference can be deduced. Yet to a neophyte, omissions of this nature make the work difficult to follow and

hence the use of a general history text becomes almost mandatory.

Johns demonstrates a weak understanding of native cultures and their imprint on Mexico City. He opens the book by stating that “The Aztecs left fragments of their shattered society, from the corn cakes and adobe huts of the peasants to the death cult that stained the sacrificial temples that rose high above their imperial capital Tenochtitlan” (p. 1). Current research on native peoples that inhabited the Central Valley of Mexico and the particularly the city of Tenochtitlan clearly reveals that they left behind far more than “fragments of their shattered society.”[4] His habitual portrayal of natives as “humbled” by Spanish conquerors gives the impression of passive natives giving way to a European juggernaut. In fact, native culture proved too resilient and therefore its pervasive influence can be found in modern Mexico City’s language, food, and diet, to name but a few elements.[5]

The book’s strengths lie not so much in shedding light on when and how Mexico City achieved its hybrid culture, but rather on the physical changes the area underwent in the late-nineteenth century. Johns outlines the use of space in terms of the layout of the city and the structure of elite homes. The chapter titled “Death and Disorder” deserves particular mention. Here he describes the rampant crime that characterized Mexico City before the advent of Diaz’s police force. The types of crime and the resulting punishments shed light on the city’s highly stratified social organization. Invariably, the poor received harsher punishment, as they were prone to conduct their criminal activities in public spaces such as streets and bars.

Ultimately the reader comes away unconvinced that the Porfiriato shaped contemporary Mexico City’s culture. Johns does succeed, however, in delineating spatial changes that took place during this period. Johns’ book, then, would serve well as a complimentary text for a course on Mexican history, or even at the general survey level, say for a course on modern Latin America or Latin American culture. His flowing prose (he purposely avoids complex language and sentence structure) would prove accessible even to first year students. The synthetic nature of the work, while failing to provide major contributions to the field of Mexican history, nevertheless presents debates on Mexico City’s growth and development in a palatable mode. In essence this book brings to life issues such as economic marginalization and racial discrimination, themes that hold interest to many students, in an unassuming and generally interesting fash-

ion.

Notes:

[1]. See John Coatsworth, *Growth Against Development: The Economic Impact of Railroads in Porfirian Mexico*. Northern Illinois University Press, 1981 and Stephen Haber, *Industry and Underdevelopment: The Industrialization of Mexico, 1890-1940*. Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 1989.

[2]. See William H. Beezeley, *Judas at the Jockey Club and Other Episodes of Porfirian Mexico*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987.

[3]. I do not mean to imply that geographers do not display sophistication in the use of historical sources but rather that the lack of historical training, in this particular case, might share some responsibility for the narrowness of primary sources.

[4]. The works that deal with this topic prove too numerous to name here. See Charles Gibson, *The Aztecs Under Spanish Rule, A History of the Indians of the Valley of Mexico, 1519-1810*. Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 1964 and James Lockhart, *The Nahuas After the Conquest, A Social and Cultural History of the Indians of Central Mexico, Sixteenth Through Eighteenth Centuries*, Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 1992.

[5]. See Jane H. Hill and Kenneth C. Hill, *Speaking Mexicano : Dynamics of Syncretic Language in Central Mexico*. Flagstaff: University of Arizona Press, 1986.

***** A Response
From Michael Johns

The major fault with my book, says Mr. Herrera, is that I rely on a “model of cultural imposition.” He accuses me, in other words, of thinking the native population was humbled by a “European juggernaut.” Well, I plead guilty. Cortes defeated the Aztec army, he leveled the once great city of Tenochtitlan, and he destroyed an empire—all in a couple of years. The Spaniards then imposed a colonial system that was based on political privilege and racial prerogative and which sent Mexican silver to the cities of Europe. By the end of the sixteenth century ninety percent of Mexico’s native population had died from combat, disease, and disruption. Survivors were abused, scorned, culturally orphaned. If that was not a juggernaut, I don’t know what is.

Mexico City’s “language, food, and diet” certainly contain elements of native culture, as Mr. Herrera says. Some descendants of Aztecs spoke Nahuatl in Diaz’s

mostly Spanish-speaking capital. Aztec food was the core of the city's diet: just think of corn, beans, and pulque, the ancestral beverage made from maguey. I also showed how Indians had clustered around the city's outlying parishes, sold flowers in the main square, and enriched Mexican Catholicism with their images of saints and the Virgin. But their real influence was not in the particular things they added to the physical and cultural stock of Diaz's city, which was more European than Aztec, after all, with its boulevards, mansions, streetcars, top hats, railroads, department stores, bull fights, social clubs, churches, cigarette factories, metal coins, newspapers, horses, guitars, cotton pants, and pistols. The real influence of Indians on the capital was in shaping how Mexicans—the mestizo nation par excellence—deal with issues like race, their native past, and their idea of the homeland, all of which I discuss in detail. Take the image of the Aztec leader Cuauhtemoc. The capital's aristocracy built a statue to him on Reforma because he had fought to the bitter end against invaders, a touchy subject in Mexican history. That same aristocracy treated real live Indians like dirt. They built no statue to Cortes, on the other hand, because he had defeated the ancestors on their home turf. But elite Mexicans cherished the modern world his victory gave them. Today the Mexican state honors an Aztec past, living Indians are mistreated or treated condescendingly, and Cortes still has no statue.

According to Mr. Herrera I do a fine job of covering topics in an introductory way, but I neglect "fundamental questions." His proof is that I show the city's wealthy imitating the French, but I do not explain why they chose the French to imitate. I explain in detail how and why this callow aristocracy depended so heavily on Europe and the United States for their ideas, goods, and styles—for even their own images of themselves. There is no need to explain why they looked especially to the French. Look at the Avenida de Mayo and the Beaux Arts palaces of turn of the century Buenos Aires, at the streets and mansions of Rio de Janeiro, at the apartment houses of Manhattan. Haussmann's Paris was the capital of the nineteenth

century; it inspired every major city in some way. Mr. Herrera is wrong to imply that the love of things French was related to France's farcical attempt to re-colonize the remains of New Spain. So much, then, for failing to address "fundamental questions." And since when, as Mr. Herrera seems to believe, is a narrative style devoid of analysis? The best analysis, he should know, is written into the narrative itself.

Mr. Herrera is not convinced that Mexico City today owes very much to the age of Diaz. Fair enough. But he does not tell us why he is unconvinced, nor does he offer an alternative period of critical influence. The age of Diaz saw the making of much of the capital's downtown, its Parque Alameda, and its Reforma Boulevard; it saw the making of its modern institutions of governance and the key features of its urban way of life; it saw the making of an official history in the form of public statuary and the rise of a sense of the Mexican nation. Other formative times and events have left their own marks, of course, from the Conquest to the Revolution. But much of what we now know as modern Mexican culture came together, I think, in the age of Diaz. Compare Mexico City in 1898 to the Mexico City of 1998. You might agree that deep cultural and political continuities underlie most of the apparent changes.

One more thing. "In essence," Mr. Herrera writes, "this book brings to life issues such as economic marginalization and racial discrimination ..." I do talk about poverty and the treatment of the indio, and many other things as well. But I hope readers see what Mr. Herrera—whether for reasons of political conviction, group redemption, or personal philosophy—does not: that the essence of the book is not in the separate parts but in the whole, that its purpose is to reveal the character of Mexico in the capital city during the reign of Diaz.

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