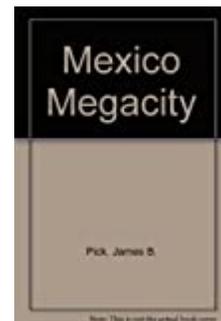




James B. Pick, Edgar W. Butler. *Mexico Megacity*. Boulder, Col.: Westview Press, 1997. xviii + 411 pp. \$90.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8133-8983-7.



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Despite the existence of other important urban centers in modern Mexico, Mexico City remains the nucleus of political and economic power. In the last decades it has come to dominate popular culture as well, primarily due to its role as the central base for the country's television, radio, and newspaper industries. To better understand this massive metropolis' problems and potential, James B. Pick (professor of management and business) and Edgar W. Butler (professor of sociology) have examined a forty-year period in the life of the city, from 1950-1990, occasionally extending their analysis to 1930. The resulting work, *Mexico Megacity*, titled thus after the latest moniker applied to the city under study, ranks as a major contribution to the field of quantitative history in general and more specifically to the field of modern Latin American history. The book betrays the two scholars' many years of work on such varied topics as Mexico's economy, labor, and mortality. *Mexico Megacity* reflects the management and sociological backgrounds of the authors as it sets out to cover "demographic, social, economic, environmental, labor force, and corporate themes" (p. 2).

In the tradition of quantitative studies pioneered by serials such as the *Statistical Abstract of Latin America*[1], Pick and Butler hesitate to interpret the information too profoundly, preferring instead to provide data, analysis,

and narrative.[2] This does not mean that *Mexico Megacity* is a mere collection of raw data, but it does demonstrate the authors' greater interest in presenting findings and supporting data than in making value judgments. Yet, at times, particularly in cases dealing with the unequal distribution of resources that result in exploitation, Pick and Butler do not refrain from expressing their opinions. In the main, however, Pick and Butler avoid unnecessary polemics and instead concentrate on the task at hand, providing policy makers and interested scholars with an analytical framework for understanding modern Mexico City and other like urban centers. In an effort to make the book accessible to non-specialists, Pick and Butler also provide introductory information to facilitate comprehension of their study.

As sources, Pick and Butler rely on materials contained in the Mexico Database Project, a massive collection of published and unpublished sources including census records and annual statistical volumes published by the Mexican federal government. A book such as *Mexico Megacity*, if it intends to ever see print, must by force rely on easily accessible materials. To do otherwise runs the risk of getting trapped into an endless, and often not fruitful, search of widely scattered documents. Pick and Butler state that they developed this book as part of the Database Project. The primary sources in the

Database Project, in combination with an exhaustive bibliography, allow them to fully document their conclusions and makes *Mexico Megacity* an excellent example of the blending of raw and interpreted data.

Pick and Butler divide their book into thirteen chapters, eleven core, an introduction, and conclusion. They are titled as follows: "Overview;" "Urbanization in Mexico;" "Population of Mexico Megacity;" "Marriage, Fertility, and Family;" "Migration;" "Mortality and Health;" "Environment and Housing;" "Socioeconomic Characteristics;" "The Economy;" "Labor Force and Labor Market;" "Economic Transformation in Mexico Megacity;" "Spatial Structure of Mexico Megacity;" and "Mexico Megacity in the Future." Additionally, the book contains about 380 figures, maps, and tables. The use of figures and tables provides easily accessible corroboration for the points raised in the text while the maps give a welcomed spatial portrayal of themes such as divorce, mortality, and automobile ownership (to name just three) as related to the city's delegations and *municipios* (municipalities). As well, dividing the city along extant political clusters serves to illustrate not only the concentration of wealth in some areas over others, but also the similarities and differences in employed labor and education.

Chapter Two covers the topic of urbanization in Mexico, an exploding and pressing problem throughout Latin America today. The chronology extends from 1821 to 1990, with major focus placed on the period from 1970 to the present. Rather than focus on Mexico City as an isolated case, the authors examine the process in a national context. Put differently, Pick and Butler examine the growth of cities throughout Mexico and then compare Mexico City to its other national counterparts. They continue this mode of discussion throughout the book. This method proves exemplary as it provides a broad context and gives immediacy to their discussion. The Mexican federal government long ago identified the problem of runaway growth and consciously sought to alleviate the problem. Pick and Butler discuss policies, such as the creation of the Mexico Population Council (known by its Spanish acronym of CONAPO). CONAPO successfully sought to siphon away excess population from Mexico City to other urban areas or, in the best of cases, prevent migration to Mexico City altogether. By taking an active role, the Mexican federal government directly contested the notion that a primary city is unavoidable. Indeed, Pick and Butler found that Mexico City's percentage of the total national population will likely decrease from 25 percent to 18 percent from 1990 to 2015 (p. 50). Despite the drop of 7 percent, Mexico City will retain its national

dominance in raw numbers. Yet one is left with the impression that had the federal government not intervened the situation would have been far worse.

In Chapter Three, Pick and Butler contest Surinder Mehta's thesis that primary cities result partially from a country's small size and large population (p. 55). The authors do not question Mexico City's primacy—indeed they cite the city's primacy index as 2.0 in 1830 (that is Mexico City was twice as large as the next largest city at that time), 8.3 in 1950 and decreasing to 5.4 in 1990. As well, the authors found that in terms of political and economic dominance Mexico City also fits well into the primary city model. Additionally, Pick and Butler conclude that while Mexico City's percentage of the total national population is indeed declining (see above) its net population is increasing. Interestingly, the traditional core of Mexico City, while densely congested, has lost population to the outlying areas. Thus the city continues to expand, with public transportation grids serving as magnets for the population. Yet Mehta's equation of large population with small country size does not explain Mexico City's position of primacy. For one thing, Mexico boasts a large national territory, a somewhat dispersed population, and other urban areas that, while significantly smaller than Mexico City, are still substantial. This situation makes Mexico City quite distinct from other nearby primate cities (e.g. Guatemala and San Salvador) that more closely resemble Mehta's model. Therefore, Pick and Butler suggest that Mexico City might represent either a model of a primate city in transition or an anomaly to the influential model presented by Mehta.

Nearly every chapter contains new and extremely useful information, although Chapter Seven proved the most interesting, at least to this reviewer. In this chapter, the authors shed light on the impact that Mexico City's burgeoning population has had on the environment. They create aggregate statistics (and present them in cluster form) for indicators such as housing, sewage, and the use of coal and firewood. This chapter is also timely given the strong international interest in improving ecological management. The federal government has made some effort to curtail the most pressing problems, but these have been too few and under-budgeted to make significant progress. Pick and Butler found that the implementation of aggressive measures to control the number of automobiles, emissions of industries, and waste management would help greatly in preventing a worsening of the situation. Interestingly, the authors postulate that a lack of governmental commitment and not resources bears the greatest blame.

Despite its overall strengths, the book does have minor flaws. Some errors, such as the misspelling of Porfirio Daz' name (spelled as Porforio Diaz, p. 253), have no place in a book on Mexico City. The fault for this would seem to lie with the publisher and not the authors. Additionally, on a few occasions Pick and Butler make comments without providing necessary discussion leaving the reader somewhat bewildered. In Chapter Four, they state "As Mexican society gradually modernizes and outgrows somewhat its Spanish, Catholic social traditions, there are indicators of emerging forms of family structure" (p. 97). Since the authors do not expand on this comment it would seem that they subscribe to the idea that Catholicism and Mexico's Spanish past (no mention of native contributions) have to a large extent dictated family structures. Yet earlier in the same chapter they state that "Free union, sometimes called common law marriage, has been prevalent in Mexico for generations" (p. 89). So which is it, a strong Catholic tradition that dictates family structures or a pragmatic adaptation of Catholic tradition? In all fairness, the authors state from the onset that they intend to avoid discussions such as this, but by making such comments they only distract the reader from what otherwise ranks as an excellent and highly recommended study.

Notes

[1]. For other examples of classics of Latin American quantitative works see James Wilkie, *The Mexican Revolution: Federal Expenditure and Social Change Since 1910* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967) and , *The Bolivian Revolution and U.S. Aid Since 1952: Financial Background and Context of Political Decisions* (*Los Angeles: Latin American Studies Center, University of California, 1969*) and Robert S. Byars and Joseph L. Love, editors, *Quantitative Social Science Research on Latin America* (Urbana:University of Illinois Press, 1973).

[2]. I do not intend to imply that quantitative history originated in the field of Latin America. Quantitative history has its roots deeply entrenched in the Annales School. See Peter Burke, *The French Historical Revolution, The Annales School 1929-89* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990): pp. 53-64.

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