

UNDERSTANDING THE MEXICAN ECONOMY

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A Social, Cultural, and Political Overview

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

To the young Dreamers, on both sides of the border ...

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Introduction

Although sometimes portrayed as a simple country with a homogeneous population, Mexico has a complex history. It is home to a wide variety of citizens who often have competing agendas. Few generalizations can be made about its economy, culture, or politics and government. It is a country of often striking beauty and abundant reserves of natural resources, yet its use of these resources is often cumbersome. It is home to a vibrant and increasingly educated workforce, yet in recent years it has been plagued by slow growth and economic stagnation. Finally, it is a country where religious faith and strong family ties are revered, yet, in spite of this, it now finds itself crippled by corruption and high levels of drug-related violence.

Mexico, of course, does not exist in isolation from the rest of the world, and over the course of its long history, it has interacted extensively with a host of countries in both Europe and in the Americas. Most importantly, Mexico has had to deal with the United States on a number of fronts. Given the geographic proximity of the two countries, their vast size, and their large growing populations, it was inevitable that the two countries would develop extensive ties over the past 200 years, and indeed this is the case. Mexico and the US presently have extensive economic and trade relations, and this is especially important in the areas of manufacturing, agriculture, and natural resources. In the past, there have been periods of widespread migration from Mexico to the United States and problems with this migration persist and continue to be a flashpoint between the two countries. Another such flashpoint is the aforementioned trafficking of illegal drugs. Since the 1990s large quantities of such drugs have been transported through Mexico to markets in both Mexico and the United States, and these drugs have imposed an enormous toll on the two countries, both in terms of their human cost and the large amount of resources spent to deal with law enforcement and drug rehabilitation.

In writing this book, our goal has been to produce a guide to understanding the economy, culture, and politics of Mexico for both the academic as well as the general reader. This is a presentation of recent research, both our own and that of others, which attempts to explain how Mexico evolved as well as to identify the economic, political, and social forces which influence the Mexico we see today. In doing this, we have attempted to go beyond a simple description of what has gone on or is currently happening in Mexico. Thus, in the chapters to come we delve into the factors which shaped Mexico's history and examine the underlying causes behind the challenges which it now faces. This is not a history

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book as such though many parts of it describe important events in Mexico's history. By the same token it is not a geography book, though a number of maps are provided for use in our exposition.

Simply stated, the aim of this book is to provide perspective, insight and understanding about all of the important issues now facing Mexico. Our wish was to design a book with a structure that gives the reader as much flexibility as possible. It can be read from cover to cover, or if desired, one can largely ignore the order of the chapters and go directly to a topic or a topic area of interest without encountering confusing discussions involving extraneous material from previous chapters.

That being said, it is important to read chapter 1 first, since it is there where we provide the historical and geographical background necessary to understand our discussion of the topics analyzed in the chapters to come. Following the presentation of general background material in Chapter 1, the remaining chapters of our book are arranged by topic and then placed, somewhat arbitrarily, into two broad groups. Chapters 2–5 deal primarily, but not exclusively, with Mexico's historic development and describe how the topics which are covered there evolved and changed over the course of Mexico's history. Chapters 6–10, on the other hand, focus primarily on more recent developments and deal with current issues and policy alternatives that Mexico now faces.

In Chapter 2, we focus our attention on Mexico's natural resources and examine the history of mining and fossil fuel extraction from colonial times up to the present. Next, in Chapter 3, we shift our attention to Mexico's governing institutions and geography, looking at how wealth and income differ along class lines, among ethnic groups, and between the various regions of the country. In Chapter 4, we once more return to an examination of Mexican history, but this time with a distinctly different focus. Whereas in Chapter 2 we had examined the role of natural resources in Mexico's economy, here we look at the evolution of Mexico's human resources. A variety of physical, economic, and social indices such as health and education are employed to chart variations in the well-being of Mexico's population over time, and to examine the factors that could be most effective in alleviating endemic problems like widespread poverty. Chapter 5 then carries this analysis one step further, and using both national and regional data, we explore how successful Mexico's lowest income citizens have been in escaping poverty and attaining a higher standard of living over the course of several generations.

Similarly, our presentations in Chapters 7, 8, and 9 center around the results of an economic simulation model which is first developed and explained in Chapter 6.¹ Thus, one should initially proceed to chapter 6 before going on to any of those later chapters. The model which we employ has a fairly

¹To be more precise we actually develop three simulation models (two for Mexico and one for US). All three models however involve basically the same structure and only vary according to the country being studied and the number of years being simulated.

sophisticated mathematical structure. The intuition behind it, however, is quite straightforward and fairly easy to grasp. For the general reader then, a familiarity with the intuitive description of the model contained in Sections 1, 2, 3, and 7 of Chapter 6 is all that is necessary to understand our modeling results. As an option for the more quantitatively oriented reader, however, a mathematical treatment of the model may also be helpful, and so this is also provided in Sections 4–6 of Chapter 6.

After presenting our simulation model(s) in Chapter 6, we launch into a discussion of international trade issues in Chapter 7. There we review Mexico's past protectionist policies and examine the rationale that went into the implementation of NAFTA. NAFTA's successes and failures are discussed in depth, and our simulation models are then used to examine the implications of renewed protection versus that expanding free trade in the future.

The final three chapters of the book should be of particular interest as they deal with especially controversial topics which have long been hotly debated in both Mexico and the United States. In 2013, Mexico's Congress enacted a number of reforms in the energy sector designed to encourage foreign investment and increase fossil fuel production. In Chapter 8, we provide a detailed description of those energy reform policies. We then use our model simulations to evaluate the impact these and other policies, among them a carbon tax, may have on fossil fuel production, economic growth, and climate change. Next, in Chapter 9, we summarize the findings in the recent literature which seek to explain why Mexico's economy has been stagnating and failing to create sufficient jobs in the last few decades. Since job creation is directly tied to migration, we then tie these findings to a general discussion of Mexican immigration to the United States. We weigh the cost and benefits of continued immigration to the United States, and debate the economic and social viability of alternative immigration policies. Finally, in Chapter 10 we investigate the reasons behind the increase in drug-related violence in Mexico, and, here again, we find that Mexico's institutions have played an important role. We examine the historic roots of Mexico's drug cartels and explain the reasons behind their dramatic rise in the 1990s. The extent of the current North American drug crisis is laid out, and the options now facing policymakers in the two countries are evaluated both in terms of their economic efficiency and their social viability.

It is our hope and our belief that the chapters to come will serve as a source of valuable new information for a wide variety of readers, and that this book will provide the English-speaking audience with a fresh perspective on a country that is sometimes poorly understood, but that nonetheless, is becoming increasingly important in today's world.

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Chapter 1

A Brief History and Geographical Overview of Mexico

1.1. History: Pre-Columbian Mexico

When the Spanish arrived in Mexico in 1511, they encountered a rich civilization whose roots dated back to the Paleolithic times. Today's most reliable DNA evidence strongly supports the theory that the first humans to populate Mexico originally crossed over to the Americas from eastern Asia. For most of the twentieth century, it was believed that these early inhabitants entered North America via a land bridge near the present day Bering Strait some 19,000 years ago. Recent findings have cast some doubt on these earlier conclusions, however, and suggest that people could have entered the Americas much sooner and crossed over as early as 40,000 years ago (Dillehay, 1998, 2000, 2003; Dillehay et al., 2015; Lucas, 2017). It is now theorized that these early settlers could have utilized boats and ventured south on a route closely hugging the Pacific coast off present day Alaska and Canada (Fradmark, 1979; Mann, 2005). Regardless of the date of their original crossing and the course they followed, solid archeological evidence indicates that humans had established a presence in what is now central Mexico at least 11,000 years ago (González et al., 2003).

The original inhabitants of Mexico were most likely nomadic in nature and relied on fishing, hunting game, and gathering wild fruits and vegetables to carve out their existence. Thousands of years would pass before any notable change came about, but eventually these early Mexicans began to build larger towns and villages. As in the Old World, these larger permanent settlements were facilitated by the development of agriculture and seasonal crops. The crops that they developed, however, were quite unique to the Americas. Whereas the “Old World” civilizations in ancient Mesopotamia and East Asia had relied largely on wheat and rice, the main staple consumed in Mexico was maize (corn). Interestingly, the development of corn as a staple required extensive crossbreeding and was quite probably the first instance of extensive “genetic engineering” practiced by human beings (Mann, 2005). The cultivation of corn in pre-Columbian Mexico was supplemented by that of tomatoes, beans, chili peppers, squash, and various other crops that first made their appearance in the Americas before being exported to Europe by early explorers.

One of the oldest civilizations to emerge in Mexico was that of the Olmecs. The Olmecs inhabited a region in eastern Mexico near the present day city of Veracruz, and their settlements of San Lorenzo and La Venta date back to

1800 BCE. In the centuries that followed, other sophisticated civilizations took root in various regions throughout Mexico. In what is now the State of Oaxaca (in southwestern Mexico), the Zapotecs constructed the great temples and monuments of Monte Albán. To their north and west were the (often warring) city-states of the Nadzahal (or Mixtec) people, and to their east on the Yucatán peninsula lay the sprawling kingdoms of the Maya.

The central valley of Mexico has been the site of a host of civilizations stretching back to antiquity. The first great city to be constructed was Teotihuacan. Teotihuacan flourished between the first and eighth centuries AD. At its height it was home to more than 120,000 people, and its great pyramids (25 miles to the northeast of Mexico City) are still a major attraction (Millon, 1967). After the fall of Teotihuacan, central Mexico came under the control of the Toltecs whose rule stretched from 800 CE (AD) to 1200 CE (AD) until they too fell into a state of decline. In the power vacuum that ensued, a number of groups vied to set up a power base in central Mexico. The situation remained fluid for quite some time, but finally, in the early 1400s, a people known as the Mexica together with two other indigenous groups formed a “triple alliance” and established the Aztec empire. The Aztecs built an impressive capital at Tenochtitlan in the middle of an ancient lake where modern day Mexico City now stands. Tenochtitlan and its surrounding areas held between 200,000 and 300,000 inhabitants and provided a central base from which the Aztecs ruled a vast area of central Mexico (Restall, 2018). Collecting tribute from their vassal states, the Aztecs became wealthy and held power for almost a century until the arrival of the Spanish.

Far from being primitive and intellectually backward, the civilizations of pre-Columbian Mexico were quite adept and excelled in a number of areas. In addition to developing a number of important agricultural products, many of these groups were highly literate and scientifically advanced. Astronomy, mathematics, philosophy, art, architecture, and poetry all flourished throughout the regions. The economies of these societies were also quite sophisticated. Mining, commerce, and trade thrived throughout Mexico, and, centuries before NAFTA, the people of Chaco Canyon and Mesa Verde in the US were actively trading tools and agricultural products with their counterparts in Mexico. Indeed, the “New World,” in which the Spanish explorers now found themselves, was in many respects as highly advanced as the “Old World” from which they had come.

1.1.1. The Arrival of the Spanish and Colonial Mexico

Although the first Spanish explorers reached what is now Mexico in 1511, the actual Spanish Conquest of the Aztec Empire dates back to April 22, 1519 when an expeditionary force headed by Hernán Cortés came ashore near present day Veracruz. In setting out to conquer territory in the New World, the Spanish were driven by several distinct motives. In addition to the urge to explore new areas, many of the Spanish who arrived were driven by religious fervor and a wish to expand the empire of Spain’s Catholic Monarchy. However, other

motives were also involved, including a desire for political power, personal fame, and the wealth that these new lands had to offer. Although badly outnumbered by their Aztec adversaries, the Spaniards enjoyed a number of advantages. From a purely military standpoint, they had steel armaments, gunpowder, and domesticated horses to ride in to battle. Perhaps more importantly, however, discontent with the Aztec's heavy-handed rule afforded the Spanish a host of ready allies, and the susceptibility of the indigenous peoples to Old World diseases would eventually lead to heavy losses among the Aztec troops¹.

A few months after their arrival, the Spanish began their march inland, and in September 1519, they engaged the armies of the Tlaxcala alliance in battle. The Tlaxcaltecas were rivals of the Aztecs, and soon they put aside their differences with the Spanish and the two groups formed an alliance. On October 25, 1519, their combined forces marched on the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan. There, Hernán Cortés met the Aztec leader Moctezuma, and, at least initially, the two groups avoided outright warfare. The Spanish remained in Tenochtitlan for the next seven months in the midst of an increasingly tense situation. On July 1, 1520, following the killing of Moctezuma, hostilities broke out and the Spanish were driven out of the city by Aztec forces in what is now referred to as the “*Noche Triste*.”²

After suffering heavy losses, the Spanish and their allies regrouped and returned to Mexico's central valley in early 1521. In the ensuing months, a number of battles took place between the Spanish/allied armies and the Aztec troops under the command of the Aztec's new leader, Cuauhtémoc. At the same time, an outbreak of smallpox occurred, ravaging the country and decimating the indigenous population of Tenochtitlan. The climactic battle occurred in the Summer of 1521. Tremendous casualties were suffered on both sides as pitched battles were fought throughout the city. Finally, on August 13, 1521, the city's central plaza fell, the Aztec leaders were captured, and central Mexico came under the rule of the Spanish.³

Once central Mexico was secured, the Spanish conquerors (or *Conquistadores*) quickly moved to expand their territory and influence. Politically, the Spanish sought total dominance, effectively abrogating the terms of the treaties with their one-time allies while maintaining the strict hierarchical structure constructed

¹Many of the inhabitants of the areas surrounding the Aztec capital belonged to groups which were essentially vassal states for the Aztec empire, and, as such, they were required to render annual tribute to their overlords. (Restall, 2018).

²For centuries the accepted account has been that the Spanish captured Moctezuma and held him for seven months to do their bidding, but, recently, in a well-researched book Restall (2017) argues that Moctezuma was not in fact held by the Spanish, and that their original account was largely fabricated. The manner of Moctezuma's death also remains a matter of dispute. The accounts of the Spanish argue that he was killed by the Aztecs themselves while indigenous accounts pin the blame on the Spanish.

³Again, see Restall, 2018. Some leaders, including Cuauhtémoc, were then tortured and later killed.

by the Aztecs, only now with the landed Spanish aristocracy in control. To finance their expanding empire and fill Spain's coffers, a system of tributes, similar to that of the Aztecs was initiated, and forced labor was often employed by Spanish authorities in industries such as the mining of precious metals (see Chapter 2). A strict social order soon emerged where virtually all political and economic power was concentrated in the hands of the wealthy Spanish elite, while poverty was fairly common among the remainder of the population. At the same time, many religious practices of the indigenous groups were banned,⁴ and friars from various orders were recruited from Spain to learn the indigenous languages and convert the local inhabitants to Christianity (Ricard, 1974). Intermarriage between Spanish and indigenous people became quite common and their descendants (known as *Mestizos*) now make up the majority of Mexico's population.

The pace of Spain's military conquest varied by region, and different areas of Mexico came under Spanish dominance much more rapidly than others. Most areas of northern Mexico were subdued fairly quickly, and even large portions of today's southwest US became part of "New Spain" by the early 1600s. Areas of southern Mexico and Yucatán were, by contrast, not fully controlled by the Spanish until about 1700. Indeed, the resistance to Spanish authority by the locals in southern Mexico combined with the lack of precious metals were key initial factors in the slow economic progress that this region and its Mayan descendants have historically experienced compared to other parts of the country (see Chapter 3).

The arrival of Europeans from Spain dramatically transformed every aspect of Mexican life, and the colonial period differed markedly from the period that directly preceded it. Among other things, the Spanish brought a new language, a new religion, new foods, new art and architecture, and a new way of thinking into the country. Interestingly, however, many of these things were transformed by the indigenous population in ways that made them uniquely Mexican. Mexican cuisine, art, and music acquired a character quite different from their Spanish counterparts, and even religious celebrations such as "All Souls Day" morphed into the unmistakably Mexican "Day of the Dead." Unfortunately, the Spanish arrival also entailed immense suffering and hardship for Mexico's original inhabitants. As in other parts of the Americas, the "Old World" diseases carried by Europeans were deadly to Mexico's indigenous population.⁵ It has been estimated that, through a combination of war and disease, Mexico's population dropped from 25 to 5 million people in just the 50 years since the Spanish first arrived, a devastating loss by any measure (Malvido, 1973). In addition to this human loss, there was also a significant cultural loss as well. The language,

⁴These banned practices included human sacrifice, although various authors (see, for example Graulich, 2000; Hassler, 1992) argue that the Spanish accounts of the number of people sacrificed by the Aztecs was exaggerated by their Spanish conquerors.

⁵These diseases included smallpox, measles, bubonic plague, and influenza (see Borah & Cook, 1963; Borah, 1976).

art, and religion of Mexico's original inhabitants were either looked upon with disfavor or banned outright. Additionally, many of the codices containing a written account of these groups' culture and history were destroyed by their Spanish conquerors and lost forever.

1.1.2. Mexican Independence and Northern Wars

The Spanish colonial system proved to be remarkably resilient, but by the early 1800s, events both in the Americas and Europe conspired to change the situation in a fundamental way. In Mexico itself, the level of resentment to Spain's autocratic rule (through the Viceroy of "New Spain") had grown over time, and Mexico's rigid system based on inherited privilege and its highly skewed distribution of wealth and income created deep animosity among the lower classes. Mexicans could also observe the success of other revolutions in their own hemisphere, including the War of Independence fought in the United States. Finally, in Europe, the Napoleonic wars were wreaking havoc in Spain. French troops occupied Madrid and the Spanish monarchy maintained only a tenuous grip on its overseas possessions.

On the night of September 15, 1810, from a small village just to the north of Mexico City, Father Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla issued a call to action known as "*El Grito de Dolores*." His followers were successful in their initial confrontation with Spanish loyalists. They were, however, plagued by poor organization and lacked a solid military strategy, and eventually, they were defeated by Spanish forces. Hidalgo was later captured and then executed in 1811. The cause of independence was quickly taken by others though, most notably another priest, José María Morelos. He, like Hidalgo, called for independence from Spain, abolition of slavery, equality for non-Spaniards, and aid to the poor. Unlike Hidalgo, Morelos was an excellent military tactician and engineered a series of victories over Spanish opposition before he also was captured and then executed in December 1815. Following the death of Morelos, the independence movement was taken over by Vicente Guerrero, and, due to a critical lack of resources, large scale battles were generally avoided in favor of guerrilla tactics. By 1820, the cause of Mexican independence seemed to be on the brink of collapse. Liberal reforms in Spain, however, precipitated an agreement (known as the "Plan of Iguala") between Guerrero's army and the royalist forces led by Augustin de Iturbide. This, in turn, led to the resignation of the Spanish Viceroy and the acceptance by Spain of an independent Mexico under the Treaty of Córdoba signed on August 24, 1821.

The first decade of Mexico's existence as an independent State was fraught with turbulence, both internally and externally. Iturbide, who had assumed power after Spain's exit, soon became the target of fierce opposition from various quarters, and he abdicated his position as the emperor of Mexico in 1823. After briefly fleeing to Europe, he returned to Mexico and was executed the following year. Wars were conducted by Mexico in both Central America and the Caribbean, and Mexico's treasury was depleted as Spain (unsuccessfully) attempted to re-conquer Mexico in a series of engagements throughout the

1820s. During this period, the country was headed by a series of presidents, but no single leader managed to consolidate power until Antonio López de Santa Anna assumed the presidency in 1832. A complex individual, Santa Anna served as both a politician and military leader and was the dominant force in Mexican politics until the mid-1850s.

Upon taking power, Santa Anna quickly moved to establish tight federal control over all of Mexico's far-flung regions. Such actions were not universally popular, and were strongly opposed in both the Yucatán (in the south) and in Tejas (in the north). The northern state of Tejas (later Texas) had been opened in the 1820s to largely English-speaking settlers from the US. The area was sparsely inhabited then and Mexico had initially allowed settlement there to populate the region and make it less vulnerable to raids from Native American groups such as the Comanche. The newly arrived "Texans" had been granted entry on the condition that they convert to Catholicism, assume Mexican citizenship, and not bring in African-American slaves. The settlers had largely ignored these requirements and they bristled at Santa Anna's plans for a more centrally governed Mexico. The situation deteriorated rapidly and an armed struggle ensued.

Beginning with the battle in Gonzales, in October 1835, the local population engaged in a series of increasingly violent and bloody confrontations with Mexican authorities. In an attempt to quell the uprising, Santa Anna sent a 6,000-man army into Texas and personally assumed its command in February 1836. Initially, the Mexican forces were fairly successful in their efforts. They annihilated the Texan defenders of the Alamo in March, 1836, and defeated the Texan forces in a series of battles in what became known as the "Goliad Campaign." In late April, however, Santa Anna's forces were outmaneuvered by Texans under the command of General Sam Houston in the battle of San Jacinto. Santa Anna was captured in the aftermath of the battle, and, for all intents and purposes, his surrender meant that Mexico had lost possession of Texas.

In November of 1844, James Polk was elected as the president of the United States. A staunch advocate of "Manifest Destiny," Polk quickly moved to annex Texas, which had been an independent country since 1836, and to acquire ownership of lands, including California, from Mexico.⁶ Texas was annexed in June 1845, and in December of that same year, John Slidell, a businessman from New Orleans, was dispatched to Mexico City in hopes of negotiating a land purchase. At the same time, Polk sent an army under the command of General Zachary Taylor into disputed territory along the Rio Grande just to the north of Matamoros. As things turned out, the negotiations fell through, and tensions rose as Taylor's army now faced off against a Mexican force of similar size commanded by Pedro de Ampudia and Mariano Arista. Taylor blockaded the Rio

⁶See Merry, 2009.

Grande, violence ensued, and in May 1846, Mexico and the United States found themselves at war.⁷

The Mexican–American War lasted for almost two years and was fairly costly in terms of casualties. Over 13,700 men perished on the US side as a result of the conflict (Clodfelder, 2017), and Mexico’s military and civilian losses are estimated to have been as high as 40,000.⁸ The war took place over a wide expanse of territory with major engagements occurring in California, the Rio Grande valley, and northeastern Mexico, as well as along both the Pacific and Gulf coasts. The major turning point in the war occurred in March 1847 when American General Winfield Scott landed a large military contingent at the Mexican gulf port of Veracruz to the east of Mexico City. His 8,500-man army was well trained and included both Robert E. Lee and Ulysses S. Grant who 15 years later would lead massive armies against each other in the American Civil War.⁹ Scott’s army was opposed by a Mexican force commanded by Santa Anna who had once more come to power in Mexico shortly after the outbreak of these new hostilities.

After successfully laying siege and taking Veracruz, the Americans marched westward to Mexico City. The US army then scored major victories over Santa Anna’s forces at “Cerro Gordo” and “Contreras” before laying siege to the Mexican capital itself. After a short but heroic defense by Mexican forces, the Mexican fortress of Chapultepec fell on September 13, 1847, and the war was all but over.¹⁰ Santa Anna mounted one last campaign against Scott’s forces, but after losing the Battle of Hamantia on October 9th, he resigned his commission and Mexico sued for peace. After protracted negotiations, representatives of the two countries signed the “Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo.” Under this treaty, the US acquired the land that makes up most of the present day states of Arizona, Utah, Nevada, New Mexico, and California. Mexico received \$15 million (\$424 million in 2017) in “payment” as well as guarantees protecting the existing property rights of Mexican citizens living in the newly acquired US territories (Foster, 2009). The outcome of the war was extremely humiliating for Mexico. This loss, combined with that of Texas, meant that in just 11 short years Mexico had lost over 50% of the territory that it had originally claimed (see

⁷In the US, the war faced strong opposition both from northern opponents of slavery and from members of congress who were opposed to Polk’s expansionist policy. Most of these opponents were in the Whig party. They included Henry Clay (who later lost a son in this war) and (then) congressman Abraham Lincoln. The war’s most vocal advocates, on the other hand, tended to be Southern Democrats who saw this as a way to expand the area in which slavery was allowed (Merry, 2009).

⁸See Clodfelder, 2017.

⁹Later, in reflecting on the war, Grant wrote that it was “The most unjust war ever waged by a stronger nation against a weaker nation [...] an instance of a republic following the bad example of European Monarchies” (Merry, 2009, p. 474).

¹⁰Including that of six young teenage cadets at Mexico’s military academy who died in the assault and are memorialized in Mexico City’s Chapultepec Park (Foster, 2009).

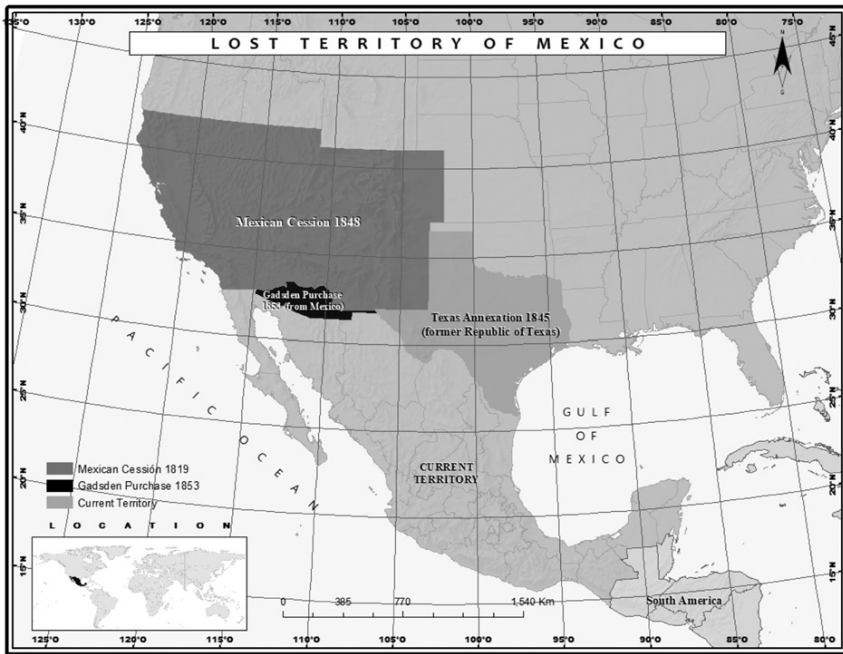


Figure 1.1. Mexico's Territory and Its Losses.

Figure 1.1).¹¹ As would be the case in any country, this loss had a profound impact on Mexico's citizens, which still resonates deeply with many segments of Mexican society to this day.

1.1.3. *Reform and Revolution*

Beginning with the arrival of the first Spanish priests in the early 1500s, the Roman Catholic Church maintained a formidable presence in Mexico, and, even after independence, its influence extended not only to the spiritual lives of its members but to the nation's politics as well. With Santa Anna's final overthrow in 1855,¹² Ignacio Comonfort assumed the presidency, and, under his leadership, the Constitution of 1857, with its liberal reforms, was ratified. Under

¹¹The final concession of land from Mexico to the US (known as the Gadsden Purchase) occurred in 1854. Hoping to obtain territory on which to build a transcontinental railroad, the US purchased a 29,670-square-mile region of land from Mexico. This land which now forms the southern region of Arizona and New Mexico was purchased for \$10 million (\$270 million in 2017 dollars) and was used by Mexico to retire some of the large foreign debts that it owed at that time.

¹²All told, Santa Anna held the Mexican Presidency a total of 11 times.

this Constitution, religious freedom was established, and the expansive land holdings of the Church were significantly restricted.

Not unexpectedly, these reforms were less than welcome in some quarters and “conservatives” led by Félix María Zuloaga set out to overturn them in the so-called “War of Reform.” As this war between factions played out between 1857 and 1861, a “liberal” pro-reform government headed by Benito Juárez was formed in Veracruz while an anti-reform government led by Zuloaga based its operations in Mexico City. Eventually, the liberals under Juárez triumphed on the battlefield, and Juárez was elected president in his own right in March 1861. The war, however, had been costly and a substantial foreign debt was amassed with large loans due to lenders in Spain, France, and Great Britain.

In an effort to collect these debts, the three European powers landed a joint expeditionary force in Veracruz in December 1861. The Emperor Napoleon III of France, however, viewed the collection of these debts as a convenient excuse to seize power in Mexico. With the US occupied in a civil war and effectively out of the picture, the French forces mounted an all-out assault and marched on Mexico City.¹³ On May 5, 1862, Mexican forces loyal to Juárez defeated the French army outside Puebla in the famous battle of *Cinco de Mayo*. The French, however, fell back to the coast and regrouped their forces. They received much needed reinforcements from France, allied themselves with conservative factions in Mexico, and launched a successful military campaign culminating in the capture of Mexico City in June 1863.

With the Juárez government exiled to the north of Mexico, Napoleon III set up the “Second Mexican Empire” which was intended to essentially be a client state of France’s Colonial Empire. Maximilian of Hapsburg, the archduke of Austria, was installed as Maximilian I of Mexico in August 1864 effectively becoming Napoleon III’s puppet ruler. The regime, however, quickly started to unravel. In 1865, republican armies under Juárez began to gain victories on the battlefield, and the US government, freed from the all-consuming concern of its Civil War, began to put pressure on France to withdraw from Mexico. France’s Mexican adventure had not proven to be as popular as Napoleon III had hoped, and the French began to remove their forces in 1866. Without French support, Maximilian’s situation became hopeless. He was captured in May 1867 and executed the following month.

Following the expulsion of French forces from Mexico, Juárez was re-elected as president twice and died in office in July 1872. Upon his death, Juárez was succeeded in office by Sebastián Lerdo de Tejada who, by and large, continued to support Juárez’s reforms. In 1877, however, Lerdo de Tejada’s government was overthrown by Porfirio Díaz. In the years that followed, the government’s agenda changed from an emphasis on liberal reform to an emphasis on internal order with the goal of promoting economic development.¹⁴ Díaz either ruled

¹³The British and Spanish forces which had also landed at Veracruz withdrew after Napoleon III’s intentions to seize power became clear.

¹⁴See Guerra, 2014.

outright or through surrogates until 1911, and his long tenure in office has come to be known as the “*Porfiriato*” (see Chapter 2).

As an administrator, Díaz came to rely extensively on a number of technocrats known as “*científicos*.”¹⁵ He was keen to promote investment as a means of economic growth and openly welcomed foreign corporations and the foreign capital that they brought in. The 1880s and 1890s saw extensive development of a national railroad system to facilitate the country’s mining (and later petroleum) sector (see Chapter 2). Because of the location of the mines, the lion’s share of this development took place in the north of the country further exacerbating already existing disparities in regional development (see Chapter 3). Díaz was by no means a champion of income redistribution and chose for the most part to keep the large landowners and economic interests happy. Thus, wealth remained quite concentrated and poverty remained high, especially in the rural areas.

Díaz strove to concentrate most of the nation’s political power in the hands of his loyalists in all branches of the government. He tried to construct as broad a coalition as possible, keeping the semblance of democracy while at the same time centralizing power in the hands of his allies in the federal bureaucracy. Law and order was of paramount importance in Díaz’s regime and so he established a strong police presence in both urban and rural areas. Given the long history of Mexico’s problems with the Roman Catholic Church, Díaz tried to maintain a neutral policy with respect to religion. Thus, for the most part, he conducted policies that would neither threaten nor reward the Church or Church-held property.

In 1911, Díaz made his intention known that he would run for the presidency one “last” time. In the election he faced Francisco Madero and during the course of the campaign he had Madero jailed. The election proceeded as scheduled, and, despite Madero’s popularity, the “official” results were highly skewed in Díaz’ favor (Garcíadiego, 2014). In the wake of these results, the election was widely seen as fraudulent. Madero himself called for Díaz’s ouster and there was massive civil unrest throughout the country. Facing outright revolt, Díaz resigned the presidency and left Mexico in May of 1911.

Following the fall of Díaz, Mexico entered a long violent period known as the “Mexican Revolution.” Although historians disagree somewhat as to exactly how long the revolution lasted, it is generally agreed that political and civil stability did not effectively re-emerge in Mexico until about 1920. Long festering resentments between different social classes and different geographical regions emerged as battles were fought in both cities and rural areas throughout the country. A complicated cast of characters vied for power and the cost of the revolution in terms of both human lives and property was enormous.

In the wake of the departure of Díaz, new elections were held in October 1911, and Madero was overwhelmingly elected as Mexico’s new president. His tenure as president, however, proved to be short-lived. Although he himself was a well-to-do landowner, Madero had campaigned as an advocate of the poor

¹⁵Ibid.

and the middle class. Thus, upon his election he was simultaneously seen as a traitor to his class by the wealthy and as too conservative and elite by liberal reformers and members of Mexico's lower classes. He was forced from office in February by a coup d'état and was later assassinated by his political opponents.

Madero's successor was Victoriano Huerta. Huerta had initially been a general under Madero, but then switched sides and orchestrated Madero's overthrow with the backing of conservative forces in Mexico, the Church, and foreign business interests who were opposed to liberal reforms. Huerta's rule was highly authoritarian and was almost immediately opposed by revolutionary movements throughout the country. In the North, armies led by Pancho Villa (see Chapter 9) and Venustiano Carranza moved against Huerta's forces, and in the south, Huerta was opposed by Emiliano Zapata (see Chapter 3). Eventually, deserted by his allies, Huerta resigned and fled the country in July of 1914.

Following the defeat of Huerta, the victors struggled against each other for control of the country. Villa and Zapata formed a brief alliance, but after winning the Battle of Celaya in April 1915, Carranza began to consolidate his power base. Villa and Zapata continued to wage guerilla campaigns in the north and south, respectively, but with limited success. Villa was pursued by the US army after his raid on Columbus New Mexico in April 1916, and was no longer a serious player after that. Zapata had some limited success in the southern areas but was assassinated by Carranza's allies in March 1919. Carranza was formally elected president in May 1917 after the proclamation of a new constitution, and he did not seek re-election in 1920. He did, however, plan to retain his power by installing a close ally in the presidency. These plans were thwarted though, and Carranza was killed, by assassination, in May 1920.

1.1.4. Post-revolution Mexico and Recent History

As noted above, the revolution took a heavy toll in terms of both life and property. The total number of combatants and civilians lost during the 10 years of fighting is hard to pin down, but recent estimates have placed this number as high as 1.5 million (Rummel, 2018). Between 1910 and 1921, Mexico's official population shrank from 15.2 million to 14.3 million, a loss of 5.4% (INEGI, 2018). Much of the physical capital built up before 1910 was destroyed in the fighting, crops were laid waste, and millions of people were displaced. Faced with bleak economic prospects at home, as many as 500,000 people migrated north to the US in the 10 years following the war (see Chapter 9), and Mexico's own economic growth stagnated until the late 1930s (Meyer, 1991).

Politically, the most important thing to emerge from the revolutionary period was the Constitution of 1917. This document was quite liberal in many respects and sought to limit the power of institutions and entities that were thought to have abused their authority in the past. The rights of the Catholic Church were severely curtailed, and Catholic officials and priests were forbidden to have any influence outside of their churches and sanctuaries. The property formerly held by the owners of large *haciendas* was redistributed to villagers under the *ejido* system, and a federal government department was established to promote

primary and secondary education in the rural areas (Vasconcelos, 1998). Various articles in the Constitution dealt specifically with labor abuses, and the rights of workers were codified by law.

The presidential administrations of Álvaro Obregón and Plutarco Elías Calles saw the enactment of many of these constitutional statutes during the 1920s. During the same period, the cause of the rural poor was also taken up by a host of writers, intellectuals, and artists, and the images of both rural and urban workers figure prominently in the murals of José Clemente Orozco and Diego Rivera (see Chapter 2). Constitutional reform, however, often met stiff opposition in conservative areas of the center of the country, such as Guanajuato, especially when it came to limiting the power and influence of the Church. Those opposed to religious reform, known as the *Cristeros*, mounted an armed uprising against government authorities, and between 1924 and 1929, a series of battles took place between the supporters of the *Cristeros* and government forces. Passions ran high on both sides, and thousands of people (both military and civilian) died before a peace was finally brokered.

In 1934, Lázaro Cárdenas was elected president of Mexico. An unapologetic leftist, Cárdenas pushed for social reform on a number of fronts. Land reform under the *ejido* program continued, the size of the government was expanded, and primary and secondary as well as higher education programs received increased support and funding. Without a doubt, however, Cárdenas' most famous act as president was to nationalize Mexico's oil and gas industry (see Chapter 2). The extraction of Mexico's fossil fuels had long been carried out primarily by foreign firms. Together with many Mexicans, Cárdenas viewed such ownership as exploitive and an infringement on Mexico's national sovereignty. Thus, in 1938, after an extended diplomatic and legal battle, the Cárdenas government placed the assets of all foreign firms under the control of the Mexican firm PEMEX (Aguilar, 2014). This action was highly popular and became a cause for nationalistic pride. Indeed, even when the oil and gas industry was deregulated in 2013 (see Chapter 8), the government took pains to somehow include national sovereignty over oil and gas extraction.

The period from the early 1940s to the late 1970s offered a welcome respite from the turbulent 30 years that had preceded it. Since its establishment in 1929, the political party that later became the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) had gained a virtual lock on all political activity at the local, state, and federal level. While this monopoly on power led to frequent abuses of authority and a widespread reputation for corruption, it also prompted political stability and the orderly transition of power from one presidential administration to the next. Economically, this period was a time of fairly rapid growth. The federal government took an active role in economic policy, and it often openly intervened in the market. Staples such as corn were heavily subsidized, state run corporations were established, and, following in the footsteps of PEMEX, Mexico's electrical power industry was nationalized in 1960 and consolidated under the Comisión Federal de Electricidad (CFE).

As in many other developing countries, during this period, policymakers in Mexico relied heavily on a foreign trade policy that emphasized "import

substitution.” Under this policy, high tariff walls were created to protect a variety of agricultural staples and manufacturing items from international competition. At the same time, the output of many domestic “infant” industries was generously subsidized in the hope of generating internal economic growth (see Chapter 7). Migration to the US continued, but at a slackened pace. The US had engaged in mass deportations of migrant workers in the wake of the US depression in the 1930s. The 1940s, however, saw the onset of the Second World War and the US actually encouraged Mexican migration during 1940–1960 under the “Bracero” program (see Chapter 9).

Mexico’s oil industry was given a substantial boost in the mid-1970s when significant deposits of petroleum were discovered off its Gulf coast. The late 1970s saw a surge in oil production, and given the relatively high oil prices of that period, PEMEX revenues funneled into the federal government were able to finance a large amount of public investment. Unfortunately for Mexico, the high oil prices of the 1970s were unsustainable and dipped sharply in the 1980s. As a result of this, Mexico’s foreign reserves dwindled and banks faced massive capital flight. Faced with this dire situation, Mexico was forced to devalue its currency substantially and ended up nationalizing its banks. To add to the nation’s misery, Mexico City suffered a massive earthquake in 1985 resulting in numerous casualties and substantial property damage. Economic recovery was slow in coming, and the 1980s are frequently referred to as “the lost decade.”

In 1988, Carlos Salinas de Gortari was elected president, and Mexico slowly began to implement “neoliberal” reforms. Tariff rates were lowered, the investment of foreign capital was encouraged, and Mexico sought to further integrate its economy with that of its northern neighbors. After a considerable period of negotiations, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) came into effect in 1994 (see Chapter 7), and Mexico seemed to have regained its economic footing. The same period saw important political changes as well that opened new possibilities. After 71 years in power, the PRI lost its grip on political power in 2000, when Vicente Fox of the Partido Acción Nacional (PAN), a right wing party, was elected president.

Auspicious as these changes were, however, the last few decades have not witnessed the disappearance of all of Mexico’s long-standing problems. In December 1994, Mexico was rocked by a major devaluation of its currency. Markets were sent reeling and inflation skyrocketed to 100% during the next year before things were again stabilized. The 1990s also saw major regional unrest as discontent among Mexico’s rural poor sparked the Zapatista uprising in the southern state of Chiapas (see Chapter 3). The trafficking of narcotics which had plagued other Latin–American countries spread to Mexico, leading to a sharp increase in crime (see Chapter 10). Finally, the thorny problem of immigration continued to provoke acrimony between Mexico and the United States. Indeed, the debate over this issue has if anything become more heated over time.

Today, Mexico finds itself at a crossroads. It is a country with a rich and complex history, amply endowed with physical beauty and large reserves of valuable resources. In recent years, it has significantly increased both its physical and human capital. Its education levels are rising, and it has a growing and

vibrant work force. At the same time, it is plagued by major problems, both at home and abroad. Its large cities face major environmental challenges such as congestion, sanitation problems, air pollution, and water contamination that all continue to pose major threats to public health. The alarming increase in crime and drug-related violence continues to grow with no end in sight. Economic stagnation seriously thwarts growth in income, the distribution of wealth and income remain highly skewed (see Chapter 5), and trade and immigration disputes cast a pall over US–Mexico relations. It is to an understanding of these problems and challenges that we turn in the chapters to come.

1.2. Geography

Modern day Mexico owes a large part of its economic and social character to its basic geography. Indeed, the nature of Mexico's terrain together with its endowment of renewable and non-renewable natural resources has defined its growth and history as much as any of the decisions made by its leaders. As with any large country, each of its regions has its own personality. In Mexico's case, however, its history and basic geography have given rise to distinct regions that vary considerably in their affluence and demography.

Overall, Mexico has 32 separate states. These states could be divided in any number of ways. For our purposes here, however, perhaps it is most natural to group them into three main geographical regions: the northern border region, the central region, and the southern region. These are all shown in the map given in [Figure 1.2](#). The North includes the states of the Baja Peninsula, or to be more precise, Baja California, where the sprawling border town of Tijuana is located, and Baja California Sur which includes the popular tourist destination of Los Cabos. The large state of Sonora lies directly south of Arizona and just to its west we find the state of Chihuahua where Ciudad Juárez, its largest city, sits just across the Rio Grande from El Paso, Texas. This northern tier of states is rounded out by Coahuila, Nuevo León, and Tamaulipas. Monterrey, the second largest city in the country, lies in Nuevo León. It is a thriving city and has become an economic hub due to its proximity to the large US market just to its west. Overall, the infrastructure of this northern region of the country is well developed, industrial growth is high, and the population is fairly prosperous. Historically, this region has seen a great deal of mining activity (see Chapter 2), and it seems to be well positioned to take advantage of its large reserves of natural gas (see Chapter 8). The region, however, is fairly dry and arid, and water for fracking purposes may be a problem since it may affect other users.

The central region of the country is composed of the states of Sinaloa, Durango, Zacatecas, San Luis Potosí, Aguascalientes, Jalisco, Querétaro, Guanajuato, Hidalgo, Morelos, Mexico City, the State of Mexico, Puebla, Tlaxcala, Jalisco, Colima, and Veracruz. This region, lying at the heart of Mexico, is known for its relatively mild climate, colonial culture, and distinctive architecture. Moderate rainfall levels combined with a mild climate make for a lengthy growing season, and a variety of crops are cultivated in this central



Figure 1.2. States and Regions of Present Day Mexico.

region throughout the year. Geographically, its terrain varies quite a bit. The landscape is generally flat along both coasts but rises, at times quite abruptly, to areas of high mountain ranges. Many volcanoes can also be found here and form a distinctive backdrop to Mexico's central valley where Mexico City is located. This region is highly populated and approximately 25% of the economic activity is concentrated here, primarily in the State of Mexico and Mexico City. Outside of Mexico City, the largest metropolitan area in this region can be found to the west in the city of Guadalajara (Mexico's third largest city), located in the state of Jalisco. This region is home to a number of beaches and ports on both coasts. Historically, however, its most important port city is Veracruz (in the state of Veracruz along the Gulf coast) which long has served as a conduit for trade between central Mexico and destinations in Europe and the eastern United States.

The southern region of Mexico is made up of the states of Michoacán, Guerrero, Oaxaca, Chiapas, Tabasco, Campeche, Yucatán, and Quintana Roo. A tropical area with significant rainfall, this region varies quite a bit both geographically and economically as one travels from east to west. To the east lies the Yucatán Peninsula and the states of Campeche, Yucatán, and Quintana Roo. Here, an extensive wet savannah covers most of that flat-low lying peninsula region. There are no major river systems and the inhabitants have long had to rely on a vast network of underground aquifers to obtain their water supplies.

Although traditionally these states have lagged behind economically, the popularity of beach resorts such as Cancún and Cozumel has led to a spate of development activity in recent years, and today this region ranks as one of the most prosperous areas in all of Mexico. To the west of Yucatán, the climate and terrain changes markedly and becomes hillier. The states of Michoacán, Guerrero, Oaxaca, Tabasco, and Chiapas are home to large swaths of both temperate and tropical forests. The landscape is often quite mountainous and many towns and villages are fairly isolated. These states are among the least developed in Mexico and lag considerably in income, infrastructure, and the quality of their primary and secondary education (see Chapter 3). They are also home to a large number indigenous groups, and, in recent years, the poverty and plight of these inhabitants has led to a significant amount of civil unrest. Presently, Mexico's largest reserves of petroleum lie in the Gulf of Mexico just off the coast of Tabasco. The development of the petroleum industry in this region, however, has not as of yet led to any significant economic gains for the local population.

Thus, the mountains and rivers play a significant role in explaining Mexico's history as well as its current diversity. Geography basically divides the country into a few relatively homogenous regions, and this can be helpful in understanding Mexico and following the rest of the book.

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