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The Social Geographies of Mexico: Five Contemporary Case Studies of Society and Space.
By David M. Walker. Copyright © 2025.
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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

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Mexico's landmass appears as a large, horn-shaped container or cornucopia. Mexico as cornucopia offers an abundance of diversity in its peoples and landscapes. The country is very urban. Its capital city is one of the largest urban centers in the world and a global city. The country also consists of the Chimalapas region in the in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. The *selvas* of the Chimalapas contain some of the highest levels of biodiversity found in the world. Mexico is considered part of the Global South and, according to the World Bank, is now an upper-middle-income country. The country has the distinction of being the world's 14th-largest economy and shares a 2,000-mile-long border with the United States, the world's superpower both economically and militarily—a fact not left unnoticed by the turn-of-the-20th-century dictator Porfirio Diaz, who proclaimed, Poor Mexico, so far from God and so close to the United States. The population in the north of Mexico is more Mestizo, or of mixed Spanish and Indigenous heritage, whereas the central highland plateaus and the southern states of Oaxaca, Chiapas, Tabasco, and the Yucatan Peninsula are populated with dozens of Indigenous communities speaking distinctive languages. According to the 2020 census, 18.74 percent of Mexico City's population identified as Indigenous peoples who migrated to the capital in search of better economic opportunities, which further blurs the false dichotomies of rural = Indigenous and urban = mestizo. Black Mexicans, who refer to themselves as Afromexicanos or *Costeños*, predominantly live in communities in the Costa Chica of

Guerrero and Oaxaca and the Gulf State of Veracruz, consisting of more than 16 percent of the country's Afromexicano population. However, all 32 states have Afromexicano populations while 9 Mexican states have Afromexicano populations that exceed 2% and those 9 states account for 31.2% of the Afromexican citizens living throughout the country. Highland desserts, rich woodlands, vast coastlines and rich natural ports, large river systems and watersheds in the south of the country, and the Sierra Madre Occidental and Oriental mountain ranges create the extreme physical geographic features of the country. The social landscapes and geographies of Mexico are indeed rich.

Chapter Outline

After indicating the important reasons to study Mexico, the next section describes the theoretical framework of the chapter: the social relations between society and space. The third section discusses Indigenous Mexico, including Indigenous civilizations and technology, and *Mestizaje*. In the fourth section, important moments in post-Revolution (ca. 1934) 20th- and 21st-century Mexican politics and political changes are delineated, from economic and political shifts, to Zapatismo, to political decentralization and the possible emergence of a codified multicultural Mexico. The fifth section provides an outline of the book and describes the research methods. The information provided in this chapter is intended to inform the reader about the larger structural settings wherein these case studies occur. The last two sections explain who this book is for and provide suggestions on how to use this book.

Why Study Mexico?

This is a great moment to study Mexico and its people as the world (but especially the United States) needs to recognize the diversity, resilience, entrepreneurialism, and tenacity of the Mexican people in this increasingly interconnected global society. Mexico is too often commonly associated with tequila, beaches, fiestas, and cacti on one hand, and poverty, drug trafficking, violence, and workers migrating to the United States on the other. These binary perceptions do hold some degree of truth, but they fail to capture the ecological and cultural richness and global

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importance of the country. Indeed, *Los Estados Unidos de Mexico*, or the United States of Mexico, which is the country's official title, consists of much more.

Mexico is the 10th-most populated country in the world with 132 million people. It has the 13th-largest gross domestic product in the world and sixth largest landmass. Mexico is currently the largest goods-trading partner of the United States and Canada. U.S. exports of goods and services to Mexico supported 4.9 million jobs in the United States in 2015 according to data from the Woodrow Wilson Center's Mexico Institute. Approximately 36 million people either born in Mexico who have emigrated to the United States or are of Mexican origin currently live in Mexico's neighbor to the north, *Los Estados Unidos de America*, the United States of America. The country's diversity is seldom understood by foreigners traveling to Mexico for business or pleasure. Aside from the important cross-border, transnational contributions from institutions of higher education at the U.S.–Mexico border (such as the Institute for Regional Studies of the Californias, housed at San Diego State University, and El Colegio de La Frontera Norte situated in Baja California Norte), there are no Mexican textbooks translated into English and studied in university classrooms across the United States and Canada and in the rest of the English-speaking world. As described in the Preface, while this book does not seek to provide an encyclopedic overview of Mexico, it offers insights for readers to begin to develop a more nuanced understanding of the country.

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Social Relations, Society, and Space: What Is Social Geography?

In the introductory classroom, the elements of geography are divided between the natural sciences (physical geography) and the social sciences (human geography). The divisions are further layered into subdivisions. Although human geography is divided into the subfields of political, economic, urban, cultural, environmental, and historical geography, for example, physical geography subdisciplines are divided into weather and climate, geomorphology, water, rocks and minerals, and plants and animals. However, these divisions do not reflect the way the world around us works.

For example, in Chapter 4 on Tijuana, downtown Tijuana is socially reproduced beginning in the early years of the 2010s by young Tijuana

residents employing and selling culture—the vernacular Nortec music, art, and food. This activity brings about the production of space and the creation of places imagined by and intended for Tijuana residents' consumption, instead of how the spaces had been utilized for U.S.-tourist vice consumption in brothels and in Mexican fantasy-heritage cantinas. The distinctive reproduction of space in downtown Tijuana demonstrates the co-constitution and codependence of social and economic processes. In the newly reconfigured spaces of downtown Tijuana, culture and economy are mutually constitutive.

Chapter 6, which describes the Indigenous Zoque production of space in creating the buffer villages to protect their territory and control the resources of the Chimalapas, provides an additional example of how these (sub) disciplines are often falsely reinforced in the classroom and are not representative of what occurs in the world around us. The Zoques reconfigured their positionality by conflating nature and society—embedding themselves in and as part of nature and the natural resources found in the Chimalapas to produce and control space in this locale. This example of the conflation of nature and society demonstrates how environmental and sociocultural processes are integrated, or to further elaborate, how physical and human geography are so deeply intertwined.

Social geography does not occupy a discrete intellectual space that can be sealed off from human or physical geography subdisciplines. Social geography is expansive and eclectic, but not inclusive, or just merely wide open and all-encompassing. Yet, the most vital aspect of social geography is that "understanding space is fundamental to understanding society (and vice versa) . . . more generally, social geographers focus on the implication of this relationship [society/space] for social identities, social reproduction, social inequalities and social justice" (The Newcastle Social Geographies Collective, 2021, p. 6).

What phenomena are at the core of social geography? What are some of the key themes in social geography, and how do they relate to the case studies in this book? Additionally, where do the society–space relations concerning social identities, social reproduction, social inequalities, and social justice take place? The following section engages with these questions.

In social geography the relation of power to place and space and who and what are excluded from place and space is the key focus of *power and exclusion*. To question and analyze sociospatial processes related to social identities, social reproduction, social inequalities, and social justice is to interrogate "who holds power, how [power and exclusion] shapes

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experiences of space and place, how this affects less powerful people in society and how social power is contested" (The Newcastle Social Geographies Collective, 2021, p. 19).

Power relations are often constructed along binaries: colonizer–colonized, heteronormative–LGBTQIAP+, white–Black/non-white as well as the societal normative opposites of age, religions, and disabilities that exist in a particular mainstream society. Examples in this book reveal that power and the indicators used to differentiate the powerful from the powerless are not fixed categories.

For example, Chapter 4, "The Social Geographies of Tijuana: Urbanization at the U.S.–Mexico Border," explains how landless migrants who came to Tijuana to work in the bourgeoning offshore assembly plants, called maquiladoras, created well-organized squatter organizations that mobilized large-scale land invasions. Once they became embedded in their newly constructed self-built homes, these squatter groups would politically negotiate with the landowners and authorities to earn titles to their plots of land. The powerless landless migrants reconfigured the power dynamic between the state/landowner and the landless laborer through these large and very public land grabs, demonstrating how power is continually shifting and can be resisted.

Another concern of social geography, intertwined with power and inclusion, is the theme of *justice and inequality*. Access to justice and equality hinges directly on access to and the ability to produce the spaces for justice and equality to occur. Access to health care, education, clean drinking water, food, shelter, and gainful employment are all very spatial endeavors. Each chapter in this book is concerned about access to justice and equality. The livelihood strategies of the street vendors and garbage pickers in Mexico City, the struggle for Afromexicano recognition and region formation to access development funds in the Costa Chica, the self-help housing in the irregular settlement juxtaposed to the reproduction and reappropriation of urban space in downtown Tijuana, and the Zoques fight for the production of lived places and space to protect their territorial heritage all center around spatial issues of justice and inequality.

The case studies analyzed in this chapter take place in specific communities and cities. Analyzing the processes that occur in *communities and cities*, another key theme in social geography, is aided by intertwining the subdisciplines of geography. The social production of space in Tepito, Tijuana, the historic center, and the Costa Chica requires analyzing the sociospatial, economic, cultural, and political practices and processes

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occurring in these locales. Indeed, to understand, for example, the cultures and economies of Tepito, or why Afromexicanos want to be recognized by the state as such, requires interrogating the social production of *identity and difference*, another key theme in social geography, occurring at Tepito and in the Costa Chica.

Social geographers (Panelli, 2004) describe how identity and difference may be actively conveyed or communicated, which can occur through cultural production and consumption or speech, such as in Tijuana with the production of Nortec music or in Tepito where the slang called *albures* is spoken. Identities can be read, recognized, and reinterpreted by others, such as the examples of race and ethnicity in the Costa Chica and the Chimalapas, respectively. Identities may be renegotiated, such as the change from *pardo* or *negro* to Afromexicano in the Costa Chica. Identities may be represented and performed, as the case of adorning the body with *La Santa Muerte* tattoos by Tepito residents or the choice of Afromexicanos to wear their hair in a natural style or braided in the Costa Chica. Finally, identities can take up, employ, or even reconstruct space, as the examples of street vending and public *Santa Muerte* worship do in Tepito and in the historic center of Mexico City.

To study where society–space relations concerning social identities, social reproduction, social inequalities, and social justice take place does not require only engaging these processes at the everyday scale, or on the ground. In contrast, to analyze, for example, the case studies found in this book requires engaging in the multiple scaling of their sociospatial phenomena, or the socially produced scales from the *intimate to the global.* Nonetheless, socially produced scales do not just concern size (global/local), level (municipal/federal), and relation (corporal/institutional) as scale is not "necessarily a preordained hierarchical framework for ordering the world–local, regional, national and global. . . . [Scale] is instead a contingent outcome of the tensions that exist between structural forces and the practices of human agents . . . scale is constituted and reconstituted around relations of capitalist production, social production and consumption, and that attention to all three sets of relations is critical to understanding fully the social construction of scale" (Marston, 2000, pp. 220–221). This book analyzes the social processes producing the distinct spaces discussed in each chapter through a multiscalar lens. For example, cross-sectional policies, practices, and relationships are found in Chapter 3 about identity and region formation in the Costa Chica,

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where the reconfiguration of geographic identity, that of being from the coast to demanding to be recognized by a racial categorization, as Afromexicano, is occurring at multiple sites. From the coastal villages to the municipal seats of Pinotepa Nacional and Cuajinicuilapa, to the capitol cities of Oaxaca and Guerrero states, to the seat of the federal government in Mexico City, Afromexicanos have lobbied to be counted as Black Mexicans in order to count as Mexicans. And through their struggles—as the production of scale is the result of contestation—they have created Afromexicano NGOs by working across scales with Indigenous civil society groups and other national and international Afro-heritage NGOs, effectively producing a spatial scale (the Afromexicano NGOs), where they can mobilize their power. Additionally, one of the goals of this struggle is to have the Costa Chica recognized by the state as an autonomous region; thus, if successful, they would effectively be producing a new scale to perform their cultural, economic, and social identities.

In this section I have provided the theoretical framework that guides how I analyze the case studies found in the book. Using this social geographic framework, this section has shown how social geography encompasses an expression of many of the connections in the subfield of geography. Employing this broad understanding of social geography reflects how I imagine the best way to analyze the world.

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Indigenous Mexico

The first known remnants of human life in Mexico are community fires found in the Valley of Mexico dating from 21,000 years ago. Indigenous peoples of Mexico domesticated corn from a grass called *teocintle* to selectively breed maize plants approximately 10,000 years ago. Maze became the most important plant in Mexico, which diffused across the Americas, and is the anchor of many origin narratives for the land's peoples. Until today, Mexicans conceptualize maize as not just a crop, but a deep cultural symbol intrinsic to daily life.

Evidence shows a marked increase in pottery working by 5,500 B.C.E. and the beginning of intensive corn farming between 4,000 and 3,700 B.C.E. Thus, Mesoamerica is one of the major cultural hearths of the world, emerging in tandem at roughly the same time as the Fertile Crescent of Mesopotamia and the Nile Valley of Egypt, based on wheat; the Indus River and Ganges River valleys of India and the Yellow and

Yangtze Rivers of China, based on millet and rice; and the Andes of Peru, based on the potato.

Indigenous Civilizations

Four thousand years before contact with Europeans, Indigenous communities constructed complex cultures that matured into advanced civilizations. With advances in agricultural technology, such as the domestication of *teozintle*, and the intensification of maize, squash, bean, tomato, and cotton farming, surplus agricultural production coincided with the emergence of sedentary populations and the growth of villages and eventually cities.

The Olmecs (3,500 B.C.E.), the first major Meso-American civilization, produced pottery, fine art, and graphic symbols with which they recorded their history, society, and culture, as evidenced at the archeological sites of San Lorenzo and La Venta. A number of regional Indigenous communities eclipsed Olmec hegemony, including the Maya, Zapotec, Totonac, and Teotihuacan civilizations, who shared a common Olmec heritage. As the dominant Maya and Teotihuacan began to wane, the Toltecs came to dominate Meso-America until they too would be displaced by the nomadic tribes from the northern frontier. In 1325 the nomadic Chichimeca tribe of the Mexica—more commonly known as the Aztecs—formed a settlement called Tenochtitlán that would grow to be the well-built and organized city that amazed the Spaniards upon the arrival of Cortez and his entourage in 1519. They were awestricken when first laying eyes on the causeways crossing Lake Texcoco surrounded by the floating gardens called Chinampas that led into the largest city with a population 140,000, that they had ever witnessed. Tenochtitlan's cleanliness and order, replete with running water fountains and sewage culverts, was unparalleled compared to cities in the Iberian Peninsula (see Díaz del Castillo and Cohen, 1963, in "Suggested Resources")

Indigenous Technology

Indigenous communities consisted of advanced societies. The Olmecs, especially, excelled in mathematics. They developed the concept of zero as early as 36 B.C.E. and worked with sums of hundreds of millions. In

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astronomy, the Olmecs, followed by the Maya, measured the length of a solar year to a high degree of accuracy. Across Meso-America pre-Colombian societies domesticated crops and developed irrigation, and the methods that led to the formation of the floating gardens called Chinampas (see Díaz del Castillo and Cohen, 1963, in "Suggested Resources"), which fed Tenochtitlan's residents. These pre-Colombian societies from the Toltecs to the Teotihuacan, Maya, Zapotecs, and Aztecs built pyramids, temples, and well-organized cities replete with running water and sewage.

Mestizaje

I emphasize the position of Indigenous cultures in Mexico because they continue to be important today. In the first century after conquest, 90 percent of the 25 million people across Mexico died (see Crosby, 1972, and Mann, 2005, in "Suggested Resources"). A demographic rebound would occur in the late 18th century. Today more than 12 million people identify as Indigenous, and 6.2 million speak an Indigenous language as their maternal tongue (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía INEGI, 2020). Mexican Indigenous cultures such as the Aztecs in the Valley of Mexico, the Zapotecs and Mixtecs in Oaxaca, the Totonac in Veracruz, and the Maya in the Yucatan Peninsula and Chiapas are part of contemporary Mexican culture. The General Law on the Language Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which states that "indigenous languages will be valid, as well as Spanish, for any matter or process of public nature, as well as for full access to the management, services and public information" (Global Regulation, 2022), demonstrates the burgeoning political power that Indigenous groups have harnessed since the 1994 Zapatista Revolt.

Indeed, the national identity of Mexico is infused with Indigenous symbolism, from the eagle with a snake in its talons atop a prickly pear cactus—which is found on the Mexican flag—to the historical figures found on much of the country's currency, to place names and vocabulary.

Mexican foods are also highly influenced by Indigenous cuisines. Corn, chilis, tomatoes, chocolate, and agave for distilling mezcal and tequila or fermenting pulque; and avocados, squash, and beans—all crops endemic to Mexico—make up the core of Mexican cuisine to this day. Mexican foods also represent a form of cultural syncretism representing

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the fusion of Indigenous and Iberian ingredients and techniques, such as mole, the savory chocolate, chili, and dried-fruit sauce. The crops that emerged from Mexico inform how the world eats. Mexico is a mega-diverse country. As such, many ingredients consumed by people worldwide originate in Mexico as evidenced by their Nahuatl names. Globally, quotidianly consumed foods such as chocolate, chilis, tomatoes, maize, *camote*/sweet potatoes, vanilla, avocado, guava, *chayote*, *epazote*, *jicama*, for example, and many varieties of beans are used across the world only after the (dis)encounter that occurred with conquest, colonization, and global trade. Can you imagine Italy with no tomatoes, Ireland with no potatoes, Switzerland with no chocolate, and South Asian, Thai, and Indonesian cuisines with no capsicum/chilis? Or Mexico with no pork, for that matter? (see Crosby, 1972, in "Suggested Resources").

The capital of the nation itself is superimposed onto the Aztec city of Tenochtitlan, demonstrating how Mexican society has always already been urban. The Spanish retained the original layout of the city of Tenochtitlan, reflected today in the various city districts and in the central precinct of the Zocalo, or main square, which is located at the same site as the Aztec pyramid-temple. The power center of the Aztecs was much too important for the Spaniards to consider relocating. Many of the historic buildings in the *Centro Histórico* are built with the volcanic red rock called *tezontle* taken from the pyramids. Several pyramids and ruins remain unearthed within the urban sprawl of the city. Following independence and after a number of floods, the lakes of the valley were drained, drastically changing the landscape. The former island city now was able to spread over a dry plain. Only small remnants of the old canal city remain, such as in the celebrated flower district of Xochimilco.

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Indigenous Identity and *Mestizaje*

Overall, Mexico's identity is closely tied to its reimagined Indigenous past juxtaposed to its current, or living, Indigenous population. Mexicans do not consider themselves transplanted Europeans as do its two neighbors to the north. From Miguel Hidalgo's *grito* (cry) of independence in 1810 though the 19th century, which resulted in losing more than half the country's territory to the United States (in the War of the Northern Invasion 1848, as it is referenced in Mexican history books) and through the tumultuous Mexican Revolution (1910–1934), Mexicans began to

form their identity as mestizos. This identity became codified by the federal government's implementation of education programs that emphasized the *mestizaje* (miscegenation) of the Mexican population. Led by José Vasconcelos as the minister of education, the educational doctrine celebrated the Indigenous past and vilified the Spanish as invaders (see Joseph and Henderson, 2002, in "Suggested Resources"). Vasconcelos's theory, which is described in detail in Chapter 3, promulgated the doctrine of *la raza cósmica*—the cosmic race—the combination of Indigenous people and Europeans to form the mestizo race. However, Vasconcelos's theory did not celebrate the living Mexicans of his time. He romanticized the technologically advanced Aztecs and Mayas and ignored the lack of services and education provided to rural Indigenous communities after the revolution. He also excluded what the Mexican scholar Guillermo Bonfil Batalla would eventually call *la tercera raíz*, the third root. The third root that forms *la raza cósmica* comes from Africa; thus *mestizaje* consists of the mixture of European, Indigenous, and people of African ancestry.

Although Mexico leans heavily on its Indigenous past to create a sense of nationalism, its contemporary Indigenous identity is more complicated. While there are changes afoot in the country's attitude toward its Indigenous population, *indio*, or Indian, remains a pejorative term. Changes in Mexico's census, the formation of autonomous Indigenous communities, and laws promulgating Indigenous linguistic rights may begin to change the nation's discriminatory view of its Indigenous and Black populations.

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20th- and 21st-Century Mexico

The case studies discussed in this book do not exist within a vacuum. Decisions made by the three branches of government impact local economies and how people in these locales negotiate their lives. It is important to draw attention to the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) that emerged from the Mexican Revolution and would rule the country from 1934–2000; the shift from a state-led economic policy to free-market neoliberalism from 1980–2020; the 1994 Zapatista uprising and its impacts on Indigenous identity and autonomy, which would also influence Afromexicano struggles to be recognized and counted by the Mexican state; and the Mexican state slowly recognizing and codifying the country's

multiculturalism, which coincided with the end of PRI hegemony. This chapter does not cover these topics in depth (see "Suggested Resources" at the end of chapter for more comprehensive discussions on Zaptismo from Barry, 1999, and neoliberalism from Harvey, 2005). Nevertheless, it is important to outline these political, economic, and social trends and shifts in Mexico to help the reader understand the case studies.

La Dictadura Perfecta

The goal of the Mexican Revolution was to overthrow the dictatorship of Porfirio Diaz. This singular goal would completely change Mexican society. The colluding factions that led to the ousting of Diaz had differing reasons for doing so and did not always join together with an ultimate objective. There was no set ideology on what to do next. The violence of 1910 gave a clear start to the Mexican Revolution, but it is more difficult to identify an end point. Many scholars suggest the year 1920, but some end it with the 1917 constitution or events in the 1920s. Others argue that the revolution slowly unraveled until 1940 (see Beezley and Meyer, 2010, in "Suggested Resources").

After the rise to, and fall from power of, six Mexican presidents between 1917 and 1934, Lazaro Cardenas would be elected for a single 6-year term and could not be reelected, a term agreement that exists until today. He changed the name of the ruling party to the PRI—the Institutional Revolutionary Party—distributed power among peasants, labor, the military, and the popular sector consisting of teachers and bureaucrats, and consolidated the power structure of the PRI for the next 70 years. His administration implemented land reform through the redistribution of large landed estates into *ejidos*, which are lands communally held in the traditional Indian system of land tenure that were distributed to landless peasants after the revolution and well into the 1970s. He nationalized the oil industries, paying the mostly British and some American companies that had invested in the extraction and refining of petroleum. The PRI consolidated power from the top down, thus effectively implementing economic policies; controlling labor; controlling foreign direct investment; and mandating the budgets of the state and municipal governments. This top-down, three-tiered Mexican federal/state/municipal system was based upon loyalty to the PRI. The PRI created a form of corporatist and clientelist governance that rewarded those

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who supported the PRI hegemony and punished those who opposed the PRI machine.

Under this system, if a municipal government wants anything from a state government, it must do what the state requests, on up the chain to the federal level; thus *La ley de Herodes*, or "Herod's Law," a Mexican saying that emerged from the resulting politics of the Mexican Revolution and also the title of a film satirizing political corruption, becomes the de facto mechanisms of power. *Te tocó la ley de Herodes, o te chingas o te jodes*—an inverted form of you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours (literally translated, means either you screw others over, or you get screwed, which means you have to do something you don't want but are obliged to do so and you must do so for your own good). Mexico held elections every 6 years from 1934–2000. Every 6 years a chosen PRI candidate—who had been given the thumbs-up—*el dedazo*—would win. Thus, the PRI system was declared the perfect dictatorship of Latin American. No coup d'etats, no military interventions and overthrows, and no direct military interference by the United States throughout the post-Revolution 20th century.

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Shifts from PRI Economics to Neoliberalism

From the 1940s through the late 1970s Mexico's economy and population grew rapidly. The PRI-controlled, state-owned, and mixed-capital enterprises, combined with a highly regulated private sector, consisted of oil exports, agricultural production, the building of factories for domestic consumption—under the plan called import substitution industrialization (ISI)—and a rapidly growing tourism sector. The government strictly controlled foreign investment and imports and barred private investors from ownership in many industries, including mining, forestry, insurance, and energy production. Semiautonomous state corporations managed all primary, secondary, and tertiary sectors of the economy. Petróleos Mexicanos (PEMEX), Cementos Mexicanos (CEMEX), Teléfonos de México (TELMEX), Comisión Federal de Electricidad (CFE), Banco Nacional de México (BANAMEX), and Ferrocarriles Nacionales de México (FNP) managed, generated, and distributed energy and cement, and controlled telecommunications, banking, railways, and airlines. In addition, the government regulated the prices of many goods and services.

This era also coincides with the Bracero Program in which guest workers from Mexico were invited to the United States to fill the labor shortage caused by World War II. The Bracero Program lasted from 1941 until 1964, when it was halted—not by the United States, but by the insistence of the Mexican government, who needed the labor to fuel the ISI occurring at the time. Four and a half million Mexicans participated in the Bracero Program. These laborers sent millions of dollars home as remittances to their families. It is important to emphasize this program as an example of how emigration from Mexico to the United States functioned as an important social escape valve and marked the initiation of the country's reliance on remittances. Today remittances are Mexico's third-largest source of income after oil exports and tourism.

The Mexican Miracle refers to this period of rapid growth under ISI, which entailed remittances, tourism, oil exports, agricultural production, and urbanization. It is an example of the success of state-led capitalism in comparison to other Latin American nations.

In late 1976 massive oil reserves were found in the Gulf of Mexico at the Cantarell Field, which from 1981–2004 was Mexico's largest oil field and the second largest globally. The time of discovery coincided with high oil prices provoked by a strong and unified OPEC, who benefited from lowering production to drive up prices. U.S. banks were eager to lend money and provide technological services to Mexico to exploit the newly discovered fields. The Mexican government borrowed heavily.

In the late 1970s the country was investing in programs for food self-sufficiency, education, infrastructure, and other social services, and building the infrastructure needed to exploit the Cantarell oil reserves (see La Botz, 1995, in "Suggested Resources"). In 1980 the United States shifted politically, electing a man who ran for president by debasing big government. His ideology was based on Thatcherism (the first neoliberal experiment in the Global North), with a healthy fear of communism and a firm belief in a strong military—ironically funded by big government. After the election, Reagan quickly convinced OPEC to increase production, which lowered oil prices. Between 1977 and 1981, PEMEX oil production doubled, but with lower oil prices, overspending, and rampant inflation the country was not able to finance the loans it had taken from U.S. banks. Furthermore, in 1982, in attempts to slow down global inflation, the United States increased interest rates. Highly indebted Mexico, which invested heavily to develop its oil field, was thrown into crisis. Interest rates increased dramatically at the same time that the demand

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for oil and prices decreased. In 1982, Mexico defaulted on its interest payments, being the first sovereign nation to do so.

Mexico had few options for what to do. It negotiated an International Monetary Fund (IMF) loan of more than $3 billion that required the country to implement structural adjustment policies, or SAPs. SAPS directed the government to implement a neoliberal economic policy, including completely deregulating many industries; dismantling, privatizing, and selling off many state enterprises; welcoming large amounts of foreign investments; removing most import restrictions; devaluing the Mexican peso; and increasing interest rates (a full definition of neoliberalism is provided in Chapter 2) Thus, the Mexican Miracle abruptly shifted to a neoliberal model. This shift greatly impacted the informal market, including street vending and garbage collection. As discussed in Chapter 2 on La Santa Muerte and in Chapter 5 on garbage, the informal market and street vending have existed in Mexico since Mexico City was called Tenochtitlan. The end of the Mexican Miracle and the shift to a lean, neoliberal model merely accelerated the informal economy's growth. This is further described in Chapter 2 as roll-back and roll-out neoliberalism. The retrenchment of the state from 1982 onward greatly impacted Mexican society, politics, and economics.

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Zapatismo

On the first day of January 1994 the *Ejercito Zapatista de la Liberacion Nacional* (EZLN), or Zapatistas, composed mainly of Mayan Indians, burst onto the world scene when it occupied seven towns in the Mexican state of Chiapas, among them San Cristobal de las Casas, the second largest town in the state. Contesting the neoliberal program and producing autonomous Indigenous spaces has always been at the heart of the Zapatista movement. The neoliberal program in Mexico, coinciding with the rollback of state supports, created spaces for social movements to contest power from below that did not exist during the reign of the PRI. This uprising came as a shock to the government of Mexico, which had expected the day to mark Mexico's installation into the First World at the outset of the North American Free Trade Agreement, or NAFTA, now called the United States–Mexico–Canada Agreement, USMCA (see Barry, 1999, and Hayden, 2003, in " Suggested Resources"). The Mexican government quickly moved to squash the rebellion, sending troops

and bomber jets to Chiapas. However, under the guidance of Subcomandante Marcos, the Zapatistas ingeniously weaponized the internet, thus globally broadcasting the rebellion and converting the Zapatista revolt from a group of Mayans resisting the state's neoliberal model to a transnational movement. The eyes of the world were on Mexico in January 1994, and the state did not implement its hegemonic plans and obliterate the Zapatistas. They are still in the jungle today.

The weakening of the PRI's corporatists and clientelist mechanisms allowed groups like the Zapatistas to assert rights and demand autonomy based on ethnic *identity*, not as laborers and peasants. The Zapatistas successfully negotiated with the state to recognize Indigenous identity—not in the form of *mestizaje*—and form autonomous spaces, which would eventually become autonomous Indigenous municipalities. The goals achieved by the Zapatistas inform the case studies on Los Chimalapas, using Indigenous identity to create Indigenous municipalities governed by *usos y costumbres* (traditional Indigenous and land management agreements or laws), and the Costa Chica, the mobilization of Black identity, and the region formation found in this book.

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Multicultural Mexico?

Elections held in 2000 marked the first time since the 1910 Mexican Revolution that an opposition candidate, Vicente Fox of the National Action Party, or PAN, defeated the PRI candidate. He was succeeded in 2006 by another PAN candidate, Felipe Calderon, but Enrique Peña Nieto regained the presidency for the PRI in 2012. Then in December 2018, left-leaning, antiestablishment politician and former mayor of Mexico City (2000–2005) Andrés Manuel López Obrador, from the National Regeneration Movement or MORENA, won the election in a landslide and became president.

The devolution of the PRI machine has coincided with changes in Mexican society. Indigenous autonomous municipalities are recognized, and a law has been passed to protect "the linguistic, individual and collective rights of Indigenous peoples and communities, as well as the promotion of the daily use and development of Indigenous languages, under a context of respect for their rights" (Global Regulation, 2022). The protection of the LGBTQ community is being debated, and women's reproductive rights, including women's right to choose, are recognized, which

represents impressive advancements in a country that is still 75 percent Roman Catholic. Coinciding with these changes are the thousands of Mexicans who have chosen to leave the United States over the past decade and return home. These returning migrants decided to go back to Mexico for a variety of reasons. As they return, they bring with them distinct views of society, especially in relation to women's and LGBTQ rights. They are also using skills developed in the United States and investing in Mexico.

Methods and Book Outline

To learn about the formation and production of the places described in this book required a comprehensive approach. For each of these case studies I conducted open-ended interviews, structured interviews, participant observation, archival research, and, in the case study of the Costa Chica, employed visual methods. Triangulating these methods provides a fluent approach for learning about these distinct places. Additionally, conducting the research at the sites found in these five case studies called for embedding myself in and among the people who are producing and being shaped by these places, which involved engaging with as many actors as possible at each site.

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Chapter 2: Shrines of the Times: The Social Geographies of Contested Space in Tepito and the Historic Center of Mexico City

This chapter analyzes the corollary links among shifting economic policies in Mexico, the proliferation of the informal economy, and the intensification of Santa Muerte adoration in Mexico City's historic center and the Tepito neighborhood. Within this context, a description of Mexico City's neoliberal public–private revitalization plan of its historic center, called *El Programa de Rescate* (recovery program), is described, focusing on stakeholders' interest in the production and utilization of urban space.

I have been gathering documentation on Mexico City from 1989 until the present. More specifically, I spent a year living in Mexico City doing research for my dissertation. My mixed-methods approach includes doing archival research, conducting participant observations, interviewing the director of the Center for Tepito Studies, as well as street vendors,

market workers, Santa Muerte worshipers, Doña Queta, who cares for the Santa Muerte Shrine in Tepito, and business owners. I volunteered at the Center for Tepito Studies and Grupo Capitalista, an informal street-vending organization. I made connections at UNAM (the Autonomous University of Mexico) where I volunteered to teach urban geography for one semester, which provided an institutional affiliation that helped opened doors for me to interview city officials and attend conferences on land use in Mexico City.

Chapter 3: Identity and Place: The Social Geographies in the Costa Chica of Guerrero and Oaxaca

This chapter tells the story of the people of African descent who live in the coastal region of southern México, and how Afromexicanos produced the social geographies found along the Costa Chica. Currently, Costa Chica residents (*Costeños*) are mobilizing their Black political identity and consciousness as it relates to the production of region and place to make formal demands for an official regional recognition of the Costa Chica by the national and state Mexican governments with the goal of receiving federal and state development aid and of controlling natural resources.

I first visited the Costa Chica while living in Oaxaca City in 2004. I returned to conduct research for 2 months in the summer of 2012, a month in December–January of 2012–2013, and spent 2 months in the region in the summer of 2013. I returned for a 2-week visit in the summer of 2017. I stayed with Valentin's (a resident fisherman and friend) extended family in Corralero and at small hotels in the regional capitols of Pinotepa National, Oaxaca, and Cuajinicuilapa, in Guerrero.

Valentin and his family live in a large compound made of cinderblock homes surrounding a courtyard filled with palm and mango trees. Here I slept in a hammock and spent time with Valentin and his family gathering clams in the lagoon, socializing at the compound, and going out in the open Pacific Ocean in his 18-foot fiberglass boat only equipped with an outboard motor. No GPS, no radar, no radio. We'd leave at 3:00 A.M. and return around 11:00 A.M. with 30- to 50-pound tunas or a 10- to 15-pound snapper. Valentin would sell this haul to the local restaurant or drive it into Pinotepa—only about 15 miles away, but an hour drive. Without refrigeration, he could not preserve the fish and get it to

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markets in Acapulco or even Mexico City, where he could demand more money for the fish.

I incorporated participant observation at Valentin's compound, at the Museo de las Culturas Afro-Mestizas de la Costa Chica in the town of Cuajinicuilapa, and at La Casa de La Cultura Afro-Mestiza de La Costa Chica in the city of Pinotepa Nacional. I conducted structured interviews with the director of La Casa de La Cultura Afro-Mestiza and unstructured interviews with Valentin and his family and many others, and did archival research and visual content analysis at the museum.

Chapter 4: The Social Geographies of Tijuana: Urbanization at the U.S.–Mexico Border

This chapter explores the social production of Tijuana: how social, political, and physical geography have shaped the economies, cultures, and urban morphology of the city, as well as how the spaces of the city impact its residents and the Tijuana–San Diego border region. Geography matters. This case study centers on analyses of government policies from both sides of the border combined with the stories of migrants, artists, and entrepreneurs and how the intertwining transnational processes make the city what it is today.

I have been researching and visiting Tijuana since I was an undergraduate student in northern California. I lived in the San Diego–Tijuana region from 1996–2001, earning a master's (MA) degree and working in Tijuana. My MA thesis focused on the privatization and urbanization of *ejidos* in Tijuana. Rents were too high for a graduate student, so I rented an apartment in Tijuana and traveled back and forth across the border. I have continued to visit Tijuana at least once every year until 2017. COVID has interrupted many of my travel plans. I owe myself a trip. The research for this chapter includes years of archival research, interviews, and participant observation.

Chapter 5: In the Dumps: The Social Geographies of Trash

This chapter centers on the politics of and livelihood strategies and struggles over trash. It analyzes the shifting role that garbage plays in the urbanization of Mexico City and the garbaged networks of relationships between formal and informal economic activities and political–client

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patron relations among *pepenadores*/garbage pickers and *caciques*/political organizers. As the country's political and economic structural change that began in the 1980s continues with the maturation of neoliberal policies well into the 21st century, garbage too is impacted by disciplinary neoliberal doctrine, which affects the social politics in this locale. Population and waste production increases are linked to the story of garbage sorting in and around Mexico City as a metaphor for the shifting political economy of the city and country: from clientelist PRI state and *caciquism* to privatization as part of the neoliberalization of society.

The research for this chapter is based on archival fieldwork, participant observations, and open-ended interviews conducted in Mexico City and Alpuyeca, Morelos. In the summer of 2017, I earned a scholarship to study at the Cemanahuac Institute in Cuernavaca, Morelos. I used the time to conduct my research into the garbaged networks of Mexican trash.

Chapter 6: Zoque Indigenous-Produced Space: Social Geographies of Los Chimalapas

This chapter describes how Indigenous Zoques implemented material and metaphorical practices that are embedded in a larger framework of conceptualizations of space and "nature" into the social production of buffer villages to prevent the encroachment of illegal loggers, landless peasants, and NGOs.

Archival research, open-ended and structured interviews, and participant observations were used to gather the information for this chapter. I lived in Oaxaca for 1 year as a research assistant working on a grant studying the interconnectivity of international NGOs, national NGOs, local NGOs, and the communities on the ground where these NGOs were located. I spent the year volunteering at the World Wildlife Foundation regional offices of the World Wildlife Foundation (WWF) in Oaxaca. I also worked on the biosphere project located in the Chimalapas. During my time there I traveled to the villages of San Miguel and Santa Maria on four separate occasions as a volunteer for the WWF. I also had three random opportunities to meet and talk with Zoque leaders without the supervision of WWF officials when they showed up at the WWF offices unannounced and only I and the secretaries were present. I invited them to a nearby cantina to win their confidence and

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learn how they conceptualized their relationship to place and space in the Chimalapas. And on one occasion I met with Zoque leaders in the regional city of Juchitan to discuss the Zoque strategy of the production of buffer villages along the border of their territory.

Whom Is This Book For?

The Social Geographies of Mexico will appeal to instructors, undergraduate students, and beginning MA and PhD students in geography, Latin American and Latino studies, cultural studies, and across the social sciences, who want to learn more about the production of place in Mexico. In K–12 public school classrooms, we learn so little about the peoples and places of Mexico. This book describes in detail the production of place and space in the locales highlighted in each case study. In doing so, it will help reduce this knowledge deficit among the increasingly multicultural audiences found at 21st-century college campuses. So, while this book does not aim to be encyclopedic, it does provide an entry point for learning about life in these places.

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How to Use This Book

Although this book is not a geographic survey of Mexico that systematically describes the peoples and cultures, economic development, physical features, and environmental issues found across the entirety of the country, it can be used on its own as a core textbook to teach students about the social production of place and space, and about how identity influences and is influenced by the geographic sociospatial dialectic in these locales. Each of these engaging stories introduces geographic theories and concepts as they discuss how the social geographies of these places are produced and imagined. The introduction, which can be elaborated on by the instructor, informs the reader about the larger structural settings wherein these case studies occur. Although the chapters can be read in the order in which they are presented, there is no reason why the order cannot be switched according to each instructor's plan.

This book can also be used as a supplemental text for survey courses on Mexico and Latin America. In this case, the chapters could be chosen

by the instructor to provide an in-depth analysis of place beyond the usual understanding of facts and figures. For survey courses, any of the chapters could be assigned to provide an insight into how people are negotiating and reconfiguring their lives in distinct locales across Mexico. My hope is that instructors can add many additional, similar engagements with Mexico from their own experience and the experience of others, and together build a sense of the importance of deep engagement with a place and its people.

This book can also be used as a supplement to other materials. For example, instructors teaching courses about race in Latin America could assign Chapter 3, "The Social Geographies of the Costa Chica," to provide an example of how Blackness is being reimagined across Latin America and Mexico. Instructors interested in NGOs, or indigeneity, can assign Chapter 6, "The Social Geographies of Los Chimalapas," as supplemental reading that provides a case study of Indigenous professionalization and the shortsightedness of NGOs working in Mexico and throughout the region. A political science instructor on Mexico could assign the chapter on garbage as an example of clientelism and its shifts under the devolution of the PRI.

The book would also be useful for K–12 teachers. Here it would function as a professional development tool to help instructors gain a well-rounded understanding about the places from where their students and students' families emigrated.

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SUGGESTED RESOURCES

To learn more about the NAFTA's impacts on corn production and the Zapatista uprising, see:

Barry, T. (1999). *Zapata's revenge: Free trade and the farm crisis in Mexico*. Boston: South End Press.

Hayden, T. (2003). *The Zapatista reader.* New York: Thundermouth Press/Nations Books.

Joseph, G. M., and Henderson, T. J. (2002). *The Mexican reader: History, culture, politics.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

La Botz, D. (1995). *Democracy in Mexico: Peasant rebellion and political reform.* Boston: South End Press.

📖 For a concise history of Mexico for those who would appreciate more historical context, see:

Beezley, W. H., and Meyer, M. C. (2010). *The Oxford history of Mexico*. New York: Oxford University Press.

📖 To learn more about pre-Columbian Indigenous society, see:

Berdan, F. F., and Smith, M. E. (2020). *Everyday life in the Aztec world*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Coe, M. D. (2022). *The Maya*, tenth edition. New York: Thames & Hudson.

Coe, M. D., Urcid, J., and Koontz, R. (2019). *Mexico: From the Olmecs to the Aztecs*, eighth edition. London: Thames & Hudson.

Flannery, K. V., and Marcus, J. (2003). *The cloud people: Divergent evolution of the Zapotec and Mixtec civilizations*. Clinton Corners, NY: Percheron Press.

Roys, R. R. (1933). *The book of Chilam Balam of Chumayel: Literature of the Yucatan Mayans; The religion, calendar and legends of the Maya civilization*. London: Pantianos Classics.

Spores, R., and Balkansky, A. K. (2013). *The Mixtecs of Oaxaca: Ancient times to the present*. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press.

📖 For an understanding of the impact that smallpox and disease had on Indigenous society in Mexico and throughout the region, see:

Crosby, A. W. (1972). *The Columbian exchange: Biological and cultural consequences of 1492*. Westport, CT: Greenwood.

📖 For a firsthand account of the conquest, see:

Díaz del Castillo, B., and Cohen, J. M. (1963). *The conquest of New Spain*. Middlesex, England: Penguin Books.

📖 To learn about the environmental–societal dialectic of pre-Columbian cultures, see:

Mann, C. C. (2005). *1491: New revelations of the Americas before Columbus*. New York: Knopf.

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📖 For an Indigenous account of the conquest of Mexico by the Spaniards, see:

León Portilla, M. (1992). *The broken spears: The Aztec account of the conquest of Mexico*. Boston: Beacon Press.

📖 For an introductory geography textbook on Mexico, see:

Rhoda, R., and Burton T. (2010). *Geo-Mexico: The geography and dynamics of modern Mexico.* Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada: Sombrero Books.

📖 To learn more about the political–economic story of where neoliberalization emerged and how it proliferated across the globe, see:

Harvey, D. (2005). *A brief history of neoliberalism*. New York: Oxford University Press.

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Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía (INEGI). (2020). Lengua indígena. Retrieved June 18, 2024, from *http://inegi.org.mx/temas/lengua/#Tabulados*.

Marston, S. A. (2000). The social construction of scale. *Progress in Human Geography, 24*(2), 219–242.

The Newcastle Social Geographies Collective. (2021). *Social geographies: An Introduction*. New York: Rowman and Littlefield.

Panelli, R. (2004). *Social geographies: From difference to action*. London: SAGE.

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