H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Linda A. Newson, John King, eds. *Mexico City Through History and Culture.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. xiii + 137 pp. $35.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-19-726446-1.

Reviewed by Robert Weis (University of Northern Colorado)

Published on H-LatAm (December, 2010)

Commissioned by Dennis R. Hidalgo

Mexico City: The Beloved Behemoth

All cities consist of multiple disruptive, creative, and contentious layers that overlap and intersect uneasily among themselves. But Mexico City has more layers than most, and they are particularly apparent and arresting. Built from the ruins of the Aztec city of Tenochtitlán as the Hispanized City of Palaces that today groans and sinks, literally, under the weight of so many humans and chokes from the exhaust of so many cars, Mexico City is a monstrous, fascinating palimpsest. Enormous and variegated, the city defies generalization, which helps to explain why the essays in *Mexico City Through History and Culture* make for such an odd, uneven, and lively collection.

The book, the fruit of a 2007 symposium at the British Academy in London, features the work of seven highly respected authors who, through the lens of their respective fields, highlight crucial aspects of the city. For better and for worse, the chapters reflect this forum; as public lectures by eminent specialists, the chapters balance erudition, accessibility, and brevity (all the essays are under twenty pages) but offer little new scholarship. Most draw on findings and ideas that the authors' previous publications expounded on in depth. Footnotes and bibliographical references are sparse or absent entirely. The editors' introduction summarizes the chapters but shies from drawing out any underlying themes or linking them to literature regarding cities. On the one hand, *Mexico City Through History and Culture* is as disjointed as a conference proceedings; on the other, this conference was certainly more engaging, inviting, and eclectic than most.

After a foreword by Mexico's ambassador to the United Kingdom, lending an imprimatur of officialdom, the volume offers another key endorsement, this time by Mexico City's premier public intellectual, Carlos Monsiváis, whose preface "enumerates some of the most frequent or unusual images of the capital city" (p. 9). The work of Monsiváis is so intimately related to the celebration of the chaos of the city that his writing has become something of a travel guide to a Mexico reframed as postmodern or, in his words, "post-Apocalyptic." It is fitting that he introduce the reader to the "biblical metaphor" of the metro and the paradox of rootlessness in a city so steeped in history. For all its insights, the essay is fragmented, even for Monsiváis, and cobbled together from previously published pieces.

It also sits strangely next to the following chapter, a clear, informative, and comparatively staid essay by the archaeologist Warwick Bray on the formation of Tenochtitlán. This textual juxtaposition almost replicates the contrasts of the city itself, as represented in the cover photo in which a crowd jams through the entrance to the underground metro that lies next to both the Metropolitan Cathedral and the ruins of the Aztec Templo Mayor. Bray traces the historical development of Tenochtitlán's urban character, with its majestic architecture, sophisticated commerce, and corps of bureaucrats, in order to underscore Mexico as a place that contemporary readers can identify as civilized. "Although the Aztec capital *looked* quite unlike any European city," he writes, "*in functional terms* it was not very different from sixteenth-century Madrid or twenty-first century London" (p. 25). Readable and interesting, the chapter is a solid introduction to Tenochtitlán as a city, a crucial complement to the popular understanding of the Aztec city as a site of human sacrifice and a corrective to the connotations of

barbarism.

D. A. Brading offers an even more sweeping view in his essay that covers Mexico City's three hundred years as the colonial center of New Spain. From the Spaniards, such as Hernán Cortés, Viceroy Antonio de Mendoza, and Archbishop Juan de Zumárraga, who first designed the city's Hispanic architecture and institutions, to creoles, like Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, Sigüenza y Góngora, and Fray Servando Teresa de Mier who chronicled and forged its rise as a uniquely American city, Brading captures the splendor and dynamism of colonial Mexico City through crucial defining events. Particularly interesting is the constant interplay between the imposed Hispanic city and the persistent, though buried, Aztec city. Viceroy Mendoza ordered the destruction of the Templo Mayor and other Aztec buildings in 1538 in order to create the central plaza and the checkerboard grid inspired by Renaissance architecture, but the repaving of the same plaza two and a half centuries later uncovered lost sculptures and "marked the beginning of a rational archaeology in Mexico" (p. 51). That the chapter accomplishes so much in thirteen pages is impressive, but it begins and ends as if extracted from a larger work without adjustments for this confining brevity. There is no clear thesis and Brading's concluding remark, that Alexander von Humboldt did not "perceive any demand for independence," will leave readers unfamiliar with Mexican history puzzled (p. 52).

The volume's most cohesive chapter, and arguably its most important scholarly contribution, is Diane Davis's examination of how debates over preservation of historical architecture reveal the tensions between "key actors and institutions who have embraced 'history' as opposed to 'progress' " (p. 60). Focusing on the controversies that arose from two construction projects–the widening of the Reforma-Peralvillo and the proposed Torre Bicentenario skyscraper–Davis carefully untangles the intricate contentions between private developers, competing public institutions, political parties, street vendors, and middle-class consumers from the 1950s to the present. Her sobering conclusion notes that at present there is no comprehensive vision of how to bring the city forward and preserve its historic architecture. As a result, the city is "held hostage to a bureaucratic quagmire that will advance neither the aims of historic preservation nor the course of economic progress" (p. 81).

The final three chapters examine Mexico City through poetry, films, and photographs, respectively. Vicente Quirarte includes poems about the city that date from the seventeenth century to the present in order to show "the ways in which the poet and poetry have traced the invisible map of Mexico City, and how this initiate's language protects and strengthens memories while also helping us to live through each day with increased dignity" (p. 88). It is an elegant portrait of the city's splendor and monstrosity, its beauty and degradation: "All is colorless," writes the poet Francisco Hernández, "except for the lips of the dead woman. I look out again to admire the spring" (p. 98). "The Cinematic City," by Hugo Lara Chávez, provides a descriptive list of the movies that have portrayed the city since 1977. Though short on broad analysis–a consequence, perhaps, of his assertion that film offers portraits of "parts" of the "huge body" that is Mexico City–the essay is an indispensable guide to recent films, including *Amores Perros (2000)* and *Y tu mamá también* (2002), but also less known movies. The book ends with Magali Tercero's poignant, jabbing, and insightful reflections on photographs by Maya Goded of Mexico City prostitutes, dead bodies in the morgue, and mistreated children, as well as other images in the city, from prison, lucha libre, and the lottery, that she conjures with thoughtful commentary. These are the darker sites, characters, and moments that, like the metro, the cathedral, and the Periférico, constitute the city's everyday life.

Mexico City Through History and Culture manages to be both eclectic and compact. Rarely do the elbows of Nezahualcóyotl, Salvador Novo, and Salma Hayek rub so promiscuously. The individual chapters are too discrete to form a collage of Mexico City, but together they carry the reader to ideas, places, sights, moments, and movements that form part of the city's ever-present history and its often uncertain present. The book's mix of genres makes it an odd match for the classroom, and students of Mexico would enjoy better the contributors' original writings. But readers who want to approach the complexities of Mexico City without chewing through several monographs doubtlessly would profit from this nimble book.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

https://networks.h-net.org/h-latam

Citation: Robert Weis. Review of Newson, Linda A.; King, John, eds., *Mexico City Through History and Culture*. H-LatAm, H-Net Reviews. December, 2010.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=31434

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.