

Sharon Bailey Glasco. *Constructing Mexico City: Colonial Conflicts over Culture, Space, and Authority.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010. xv + 203 pp. \$85.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-230-61957-9.



Reviewed by Geoffrey Fox

Published on H-LatAm (March, 2013)

Commissioned by Dennis R. Hidalgo (Virginia Tech)

By the latter decades of the eighteenth century, Mexico City, the Spanish Empire's richest and grandest showcase, was a mix of splendor and squalor, where aristocrats in their finery and gilded carriages had to pass over broken pavements and filth, odorous hovels appeared like mushrooms around palaces and mansions and brothels, and pulquerías spilled out loud and drunken patrons, while naked or near-naked street people lived, loved, pissed, and often defecated in plain view. In *Constructing Mexico City*, Sharon Bailey Glasco focuses on the efforts of Juan Vicente de Güemes Pacheco y Padilla, Count of Revillagigedo and Viceroy of New Spain (1789-94), to end such affronts to the Bourbon models of order and efficiency. After the introductory chapter presenting the dilemma facing colonial reformers and reviewing the substantial literature on late colonial Mexico City, Glasco describes in greater detail the subtitle of chapter 2, "The Physical, Material, and Political Environment of Bourbon Mexico City." Here she first discusses the demographic shifts--the huge increase of the poor, a rural-based in-

igenous population, with their languages, customs, and needs--that completely subverted the Bourbon vision of a neat, orderly city with European manners. In the four remaining chapters, she focuses on Revillagigedo's modernization (or Bourbonization) campaigns in the areas of health, water distribution, garbage removal, and "the renovation of urban space" (streets, drainage, etc.).

Chapter 1 introduces the main arguments. First, Glasco argues that "the design and implementation of urban renewal served as a proxy for elite anxieties about the socioeconomic realities of the city they lived in and the desire to quell these anxieties through a reshaping of plebeian culture" (p. 1). That is, their obsession with order, and especially orderly behavior of the lower, mostly non-white classes, sprang from anxieties about their own comfort. Second, she maintains that Revillagigedo's "urban planning projects illustrate new debates in late colonial Mexico about the theme of modernity ... that grew out of Enlightenment ideas

of order and progress” and that would continue for decades after independence in the nineteenth century (p. 2). In this chapter, the author also reviews previous studies of Mexico City in the late colonial period, drawing especially from work by Silvia Arrom and Gabriel Haslip-Vera.

Chapter 2 presents the squalor and disorder in greater detail. From the point of view of the elites, the problem was the disorderly behavior of ignorant or insolent poor people, especially their insistence on invading areas of the city meant to be preserved for the more wealthy and civilized, and whiter, sectors of the population. The very rich sealed themselves off from the *hoi polloi* in their walled residences and carriages, but the not-so-rich Creoles could not avoid them. Authorities of the Crown could hardly tolerate such disorder.

The proposed (ineffective) remedy was to impose fines or (where, as was usually the case, the culprits had no resources) physical punishment to discourage the unwanted behavior. But the elites’ obsession with order made them oblivious to the structural causes of the “disorderly” (from their viewpoint) behaviors of the poor. The first of these was the dramatic increase of the city’s population beginning in the 1770s, from just over 112,000 in 1772 to nearly 180,000 in 1820, an increase of almost 60 percent. The power and wealth of the city attracted all kinds of people, including architects, engineers, and opportunity seekers. But the largest part of this influx were rural Indians, driven from their communities by a series of severe droughts and increased taxes. In the metropolis, they survived however they could, for the most part unwilling or unable to adapt to the alien norms of the colonial Spanish-speaking city. The desperately poor among them overwhelmed the capital’s church-based welfare services, which had not been designed to acculturate people to urban life but merely to provide occasional and exceptional assistance while ministering to their souls. Also, there were fewer volun-

teers for such work from among the genteel ladies. As Glasco puts it, recapping an argument of Arrom, “as material wealth increasingly gained importance as a marker of status for elites in colonial society, they came to understand poverty as an individual failure, rather than a concept that supported religious notions of charity previously so important to elite identity” (p. 7).

Chapter 3 analyzes the attempts to counter the frequent outbreaks of disease in the filthy city. Public health was primarily left up to the church, but one secular hospital, San Andrés, “the last major hospital built during the colonial period,” had been founded before Revillagigedo’s arrival (p. 69). Doctors there and in the other hospitals attempted to treat the poor according to European notions, which were resisted by many of their non-European patients. European doctors believed in the value of bleeding, whereas Mexica healers used curative herbs and heat rather than cooling to relieve fevers. Mexica and Spanish medical practices also relied on different forms of magic (offerings to the earth goddess and other divinities for the Mexica, prayer processions and novenas for the Spaniards). But the more serious problem was public spending priorities. “No money was set aside for long-term projects designed to alleviate poverty—better housing, higher quality food, or access to health care” (p. 74).

Reform of the public water system (chapter 4) was another urgent matter undertaken during Revillagigedo’s administration. Many fountains were polluted by garbage and by the washing of animals; some poor areas had no public fountains at all. Residents of the mostly poor, Indian neighborhood of Santiago Tlateloco had no local supply, and either had to purchase water from *aguadores* or walk great distances to collect it. Revillagigedo’s plans for the construction and repair of public fountains were designed to alleviate such problems, but under pressure from local authorities, representing elite interests, the funds were main-

ly diverted to “certain areas of the city: those populated by the wealthy, especially on Calles de San Francisco, San Andrés, Santa Clara, and Tacuba, and the ‘industrial’ district of the city, south of the Alameda” (p. 87). Cultural conflicts also arose in an attempt to suppress the supposedly scandalous behavior in public bathhouses. For the Mexica, bathing, including steam baths, was essential for physical and spiritual well-being, whereas Spaniards generally avoided bathing, considering it not only unhygienic but also pagan, associated with Islamic practices. In addition, they were scandalized by the thought of naked or half-naked men and women possibly mixing in the baths.

From the beginning of colonial rule, Spanish authorities had insisted on the physical segregation of the newly conquered Indian population from their white masters, for both ideological and practical reasons. Indians should live nearby to perform labor, but not immediately next to their European masters. But this rule had been violated almost immediately. Civil and religious factions among the Spanish, seeking to keep labor closer to hand, permitted or even encouraged their Indian servants and laborers to settle permanently in the supposedly all-white city center. Meanwhile, Spaniards and Creoles encroached on zones supposedly reserved for Indians. Spatial boundaries had become hopelessly blurred.

In her close analysis of Revillagigedo’s campaigns to modernize the city’s infrastructure and practices in the areas of health, water distribution, garbage removal, and urban renewal, Glasco makes abundantly clear the ideological premises and contradictions of Bourbon reforms in the colony’s richest city, and why those reforms failed to resolve fundamental, as the book’s subtitle notes, “conflicts over culture, space, and authority.” My only irritations with the book were, first, her tendency to repeat her arguments almost in the same words, from chapter to chapter (useful perhaps for readers with short attention spans,

but unnecessary in such a brief book); and second, her misleading suggestion that the grid system (of street layouts) was imposed in America because it “predominated in Spain at the time” (first stated on page 8 and repeated later). While such right-angle street layouts can be traced at least as far back as Roman military encampments, and remained an ideal for certain urban theorists, the ancient grids had been buried and had become almost unrecognizable under later urban growth in Habsburg and Bourbon Spain. The New World was taken as a tabula rasa where this ideal system could be made reality, and only later reproduced in Spain (for example, when the city of Vera—province of Almería—was reconstructed on this plan in 1520 after an earthquake had destroyed the old city).

Glasco’s vivid descriptions of daily life are fun to read, and this short book will be helpful to students seeking to understand the conflicts preceding and leading to Mexico’s war of independence from Spain. It also highlights urban conflicts that persisted long after independence.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-latam>

Citation: Geoffrey Fox. Review of Bailey Glasco, Sharon. *Constructing Mexico City: Colonial Conflicts over Culture, Space, and Authority*. H-LatAm, H-Net Reviews. March, 2013.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=31423>



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