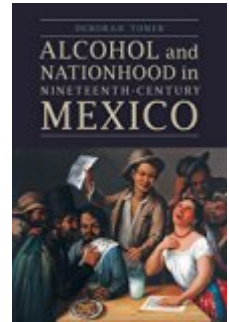


Deborah Toner. *Alcohol and Nationhood in Nineteenth-Century Mexico.* The Mexican Experience Series. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2015. 384 pp. \$70.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8032-6974-3.



Reviewed by Amy Robinson

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Commissioned by Sarah Mak (Bowdoin College)

Deborah Toner's investigation into representations and realities of alcohol use in nineteenth-century Mexico exemplifies the benefits of truly interdisciplinary scholarship. She stages a productive dialogue between literary texts, newspaper articles, legal documents, scientific discourse, and political thought to show how everyday drinking practices across the social spectrum were enjoyed, abused, regulated, represented, and interpreted. Toner couches the study in familiar terms of national belonging, citing both Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (1983) and Doris Sommer's *Foundational Fictions* (1991) to undergird the association between representations of nation and national sentiment itself. Toner's unique focus on this provocative trope of drinking in a variety of genres provides fresh readings of Mexican literature and other interrogations of national identity to ponder the role of drinking in the sometimes "ambiguous and ambivalent" construction of *lo mexicano* predominantly among lettered classes (p. xv). In that drinking has been

historically intertwined with issues of "power, social class, race and ethnicity, religious practice, cultural identity, and gender," Toner steers debates about alcohol and its consumers toward a view of the nation "as a shifting complex of narratives or discourses" (pp. xxvii, xxi).

The four-chapter book is thematically organized to examine those shifting discourses in the context of drinking spaces, gendered drinking, drunken bodies, and medicalized discourses about drinking. Chapter 1 focuses on how regulations of alcohol establishments echoed a top-down desire throughout the long nineteenth century for "social and spatial order," or an overseeing of the places where people would drink (p. 22). Toner clarifies that this was a priority "not only for the government but for the political, economic, and intellectual elite more broadly" (p. 20). The physical encroachment of popular classes, together with their drinking customs, provoked literary rebukes by José Joaquín Fernández de Lizardi (*The Mangy Parrot*, 1816), Ignacio Altamirano (*Christmas in the Mountains*, 1871), Angel de Campo (*La*

Rumba, 1890-91), José Tomás de Cuéllar (*The Magic Lantern* series, 1871-92) and Manuel Payno (*The Devil's Scarf Pin*, 1845-46, and *The Bandits of Río Frío*, 1888-91). Toner demonstrates that destructive drinking by key characters reflects attitudes revealed in archival sources regarding the elite's desire to fortify increasingly porous boundaries between elite and popular spaces. Additionally, Toner provides unique insights into contestations of elite attempts to control boundaries when, for example, owners of *pulquerías* ("taverns primarily selling pulque, a traditional fermented alcoholic beverage" [p. 3]) employed legalistic discourses to demand their rights to establish businesses in central districts, thus simultaneously undermining the fiction of elite control.

The following three chapters re-approach Mexico's nineteenth-century discourses about alcohol to frame the topic in distinct ways. Toner further examines novels by writers discussed in chapter 1, as well as novels by additional authors, including Heriberto Frías, Federico Gamboa, Juan Díaz Covarrubias, Nicolás Pizarro Suárez, Pedro Castera, and Amado Nervo. In each case, Toner underscores how literary texts often echoed concerns in the public sphere about the degenerative impact of alcohol on men's and women's bodies and, by extension, Mexican society. For example, the documents analyzed in chapter 2 point to men having some latitude to incorporate drinking into expectations for fathers, soldiers, and other expressions of masculinity and constructive fraternal bonding. By contrast, women's drinking was largely portrayed as incompatible with gendered expectations for feminine types. Toner pairs such literary observations with analysis of public commentaries in newspaper reports, political petitions, and morality campaigns. This interdisciplinary approach relays a broad understanding of drinking as an integral part of the fabric of national culture that Mexicans across the social spectrum navigated as citizens under scrutiny but with some room to negotiate individual expressions of identity. Toner presents chapters 3 and 4

as having overlapped topics; many literary examples of the grotesque bodies in chapter 3 could be interchanged with examples of medicalized bodies of chapter 4. The distinction is productive, however, in that she uses Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the grotesque to frame chapter 3's literary analysis of "open, disgusting, irrational, and dangerous bodies that threatened Mexico's future as a nation" (p. 158). On the other hand, chapter 4 focuses on medicalized discourse to underscore the late nineteenth-century emphasis on science that framed Mexico's problems of drunkenness, vagrancy, and the like as manifestations of such diseases as alcoholism and mental illness.

The more historically attuned readers may note rather brief contextualization within historical landmarks of the nineteenth century in that the author does not devote significant space to nineteenth-century wars, economic trajectories, or presidential periods. For example, Toner places limited attention on the war of independence and postwar rebuilding, the French intervention, the rise of Porfirio Díaz, or similar historical referents. Nevertheless, she handily achieves her interdisciplinary objectives. Readers familiar with the literary texts will thoroughly enjoy her guidance through the novels with meticulous focus on references to literal and metaphoric drunkenness. Likewise, investigators of nineteenth-century society's top-down legal, political, socioeconomic, and cultural codes will find great value in the well-documented presentation of how alcohol permeated discourses surrounding citizenship, social control, modernization, and national identity. Taken together, this study fruitfully illuminates how intertwined discourses provided frameworks to represent, interpret, and regulate the realities of everyday drinking practices among nineteenth-century Mexicans.

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