

Reviews

**El Tratado McLane-Ocampo.
La comunicación interoceánica
y el libre comercio**

Patricia Galeana

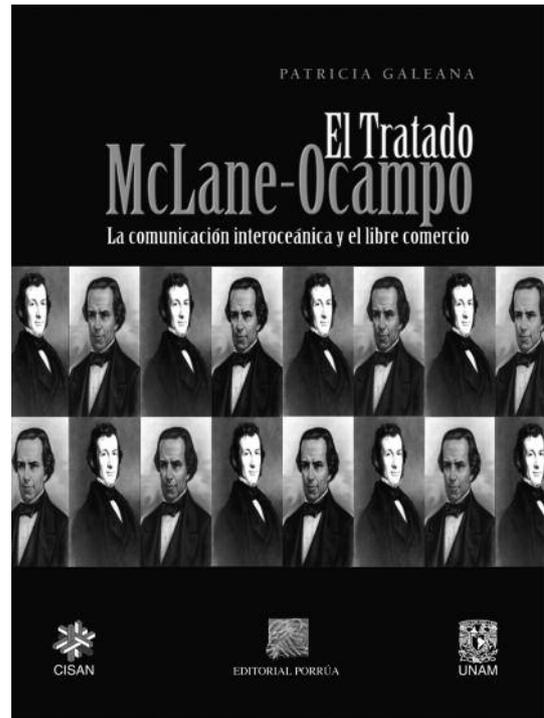
Porrúa/CISAN-UNAM

Mexico City, 2006, 515 pp.

This is a well-documented, rigorously analytical study about an issue fundamental to understanding nineteenth-century Mexico, despite its always being enormously polemical. The author's serene, measured evaluation of the historiography involved is an important plus for this book.

I have not been able to overcome the graphic, painful impact of the historic events this book recounts. No one can read this story without being moved. The Mexican nation's fragility during the nineteenth century jumps out at the reader as with few other books. The recurring civil war from 1828 on had left thinkers doubting the country's ability to govern itself. September Independence Day commemorative speeches had become the occasion to admonish the citizenry and call upon them to do their civic duty. The defeat in the war with the United States with which this book actually begins had created the fear that the nation's weakness had no means to stop new invaders and thwart their intentions. Liberals and conservatives built their alternative national projects to come to the nation's rescue, which led inevitably to a decided confrontation.

In the 1858-1860 civil war, one side conceived of the idea of calling on Europe and the monarchy to put the country back on its feet, turn its back on the United States and recover what might be left of social cohesion and hierarchy. In this vision, the viceregal period represented the founding moment of modern Mexico, with its monarchist traditions, its profound Catholicism, the Spanish language and the existing laws and customs with their recognized resistance to the test of time. The other side, the Liberals, was inspired by the ideas of political economy in vogue in Europe and in general in the Atlantic world (I am referring to the nascent political science and study of economics). For one side, the best defense against the United States and any other invader was to hold tight to tradition and customs and make sure nothing



alien could penetrate. In contrast, for the other side, Mexico was not only its pre-Hispanic or colonial past; the present represented a quest for a self-expression that would simultaneously reflect and give form to the disparate elements that made it up. What better means of advancing in that self-expression than a dialogue with the most advanced economic and political concepts of their time?

The war with the United States and the signing of an onerous treaty, rejected initially by Melchor Ocampo, as the author tells us, should have led the population to reject both the United States and its republicanism. And among a considerable part of the intellectuals of the time and other important social sectors, this is exactly what happened. From a conservative point of view, Mexico had its traditions and one had to rely on them, but for another part of the intellectuals and other important social sectors, the smell of gunpowder had not even faded when they began to recover their own profound republican convictions. They created a strange mixture—very often incomprehensible—of the pain of defeat with the demand for a deepening of Mexican republicanism

and the fulfillment of the promises to renovate the nation that had, in their eyes, been born with Miguel Hidalgo's movement. The choice was essentially simple: being weak-spirited or rising to the occasion of the transformations possible in accordance with the world's most advanced political and economic ideas. In this, the United States was not the true enemy. In the Liberal mirror on the national soul, the enemy was within. Americans attacked Mexico because our nation had shown itself incapable of being an influential actor in the international arena because it still had not carried out the fundamental reforms that were already being discussed and implemented elsewhere. However, absurd pretensions of social hierarchy continued to be maintained; barriers were placed around immigrants, their efforts and investments; in an immense country with a population of eight million, intolerance persisted and external, ostentatious religious practices continued instead of promoting modern religious instruction and a privatization of faith; and in addition, hoarding of both land and capital by religious institutions was permitted, preventing the creation of a virtuous, ascending economic cycle of economic growth and social mobility.

Two Mexicos faced off: one proud of its way of being in accordance with its origins that had given it three centuries of rock-solid existence, and the other anxious to constitute itself as a republic similar to the United States because it did not see in the country that plenitude of being the Conservatives yearned after. The Liberals observed that other countries were leaving Mexico behind because it did not want to change. Capriciously enamored of its vainglorious past, it lacked the courage to seize the present, explore new values and take advantage of its prospects in order to truly establish itself with a view to the future.

As Patricia Galeana argues throughout her book, it turned out that neither of these two Mexicos had sufficient strength to beat the other. One, resisting the disorder produced by the exercise of popular sovereignty and lamenting the sad fate of Agustín de Iturbide's First Empire, decided to resort to a foreign dynasty and power to give it strength. In practice, this would turn into the French intervention and eventually Maximilian of Habsburg's Second Empire. The other Mexico, the country dreamed of by the confirmed republicans, saw the coming monarchy and denounced it incessantly as early as the 1850s. The Liberals were violently perturbed by the praise Lucas Alamán had been expressing for Iturbide since 1848 and his condemnation in his work *Historia de Méjico* (History of Mexico) of the disorder that he argues

originated with Miguel Hidalgo. From the time of the Ayutla Plan and the Constituent Assembly of 1856, young Francisco Zarco and José María Mata demanded that the 1857 Constitution be taken as proof that Mexicans were capable of rivaling the standard bearers of progress in any country on the Atlantic. Even when it did not turn out to be everything they wanted, they defended it as a valiant step forward despite the denunciations of its conservative detractors. Later, completely bankrupt amidst the repeated defeats in the face of their conservative opponents' fearlessness in the civil war, who could they look to for support?

In her book, Patricia Galeana reveals that all the efforts to attract European diplomatic recognition and capital for the constitutional government failed. Even though they could not shake off their suspicions of U.S. motivations or withstand the negotiations for territory, the right-of-way and different reparations payments, they preferred to deal with the difficult negotiations between two republican countries than to give in an inch to the conservative proposals, an eventual monarchy and links to political formulae anchored in the past. They even maintained the possibility of forging a deep, lasting friendship with the United States, winning its respect and that of the world by transforming the country, and perhaps at some better time getting back something of what had been given up, thus fully recovering territoriality and sovereignty.

The author anticipates some critics' harsh questioning of the decisions and resolutions of the constitutional government, particularly Melchor Ocampo, Miguel Lerdo de Tejada and José María Mata, among others. She narrates the events to explain Mexico's choices in the context of the Atlantic, within the bounds of the dispute over controlling inter-oceanic access, in accordance with the two great national projects in conflict. She points out the divisions within the Liberal government, its representatives and allies. She underlines many of the resolutions and breaks of the conservative government and its standard bearers. She unravels the origin of false or distorted affirmations about the historical facts, at the same time that she presents documents to detail and subtly explain what happened. She highlights the tensest moment in which internal strife sent the negotiation of the very existence of the nation, with its two great competing projects, to the international sphere. And she particularly undertakes to decipher what the Liberals were willing and unwilling to concede to show us how they cultivated the art of diplomacy with an opponent that was at the same time their last hope and their most profound model.

In eight chapters, two biographical boxes, six maps and six appendices that include, among other things, previously unpublished documentation, and with the very useful support of analytical indices, this book takes us significantly forward in our understanding of the uncertainty of that equally weighted national conflict in the context of a competitive international sphere with its many breaches. It gives us a glimpse of the U.S. representatives' mixed motivations, the contradictions of U.S. partisan-fed policy and the not only diplomatic, but personal relations among the representatives of both nations. This book will not bore the reader: one begins to want to know what else can be clarified, what other smokescreen can be dissipated. It is not a book to be read in one sitting, but once begun, it will be difficult to put down.

Reading it obliges us to have a multi-dimensional understanding, since it leads us to simultaneously take into account

not only the complex events taking place in the country, but also the continental dimension of the isthmus crossings, the competition and complicities among the Atlantic powers, and the unavoidable, unstoppable advance of Mexico's northern neighbor. By reading it, we will ponder both conflicting national political projects and the men of flesh and blood who tried to deal with problems apparently too vast for simple solutions. We will end up by weighing particularly the Mexican who put his name to the famous McLane-Ocampo Treaty, and even measuring him in comparison to his Liberal colleagues, his conservative opponents and his U.S. counterpart. **MM**

Brian Connaughton
Historian

