

Celebrating Mexico's History



Mexico's celebration of the bicentennial of its independence may be remembered mainly for its spectacular fireworks, the dancing cathedral, the anonymous colossus, or simply for the profligate festivities, that spirit of "sparing no expense," which, as Octavio Paz observed in *El laberinto de la soledad* (The Labyrinth of Solitude), is a vigorous characteristic of our national idiosyncrasy.

Fortunately, the festivities also included other forms of remembering the fights for independence and the revolution: much quieter and more discreet, but destined, if not to last forever, at least to transcend the mere date in question and being a pretext for awakening or creating a vulgar, highly questionable form of nationalism. I am referring here to the materials published to commemorate the centennials.

Given the impossibility of reviewing that entire vast, diverse production, I will comment on the books published by the Senate Special Commission, which used most of its resources earmarked to commemorate these historic anniversaries to create an interesting, well-planned publishing program—even if it did leave out some things.

It should be mentioned that this commission, made up of legislators from different parties, is headed by Senator Mel-

quíades Morales Flores, of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), and its *pro bono* executive director is Dr. Patricia Galeana, the well-known historian who designed and guided the editorial work itself, giving it its own distinctive seal.

LEGAL WORKS

1. The *Historia de las instituciones jurídicas de los estados* (History of the States' Legal Institutions) Collection

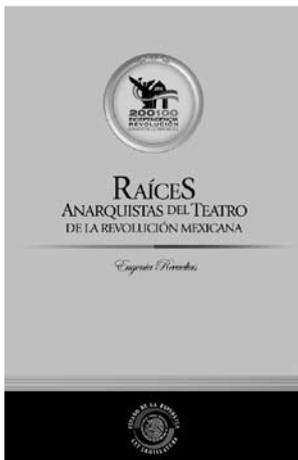
One of this publishing program's most notable proposals is the *Historia de las instituciones jurídicas de los estados* (History of the States' Legal Institutions) collection, a series of 33 books in a medium-sized format with gold covers dedicated to each of the 32 states (including Mexico City's Federal District), plus an introductory volume covering the territories (like Texas, California, New Mexico, and Utah) that are no longer part of Mexico, but which, in their time, produced *sui generis* legal instruments. The collection was published jointly with the UNAM Institute for Legal Research, and coordinated by Dr. Patricia Galeana and Dr. Daniel Barceló.

Despite the high degree of specialization needed to write each volume, *Historia de las instituciones jurídicas de los estados* is not necessarily directed at specialists.

There is no attempt to present a history of the creation of each state's Constitution. However, in every case, different documents are examined that had a definitive influence on the existing legal framework in each state. It would not be wrong to say, however, that each book's center is the story of the vicissitudes of how the local Constitution came into being, how it was written, and how it was amended and its articles repealed.

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2. *Constitución Política de los Estados Unidos Mexicanos* en lenguas indígenas (The Mexican Constitution in Indigenous Languages)



Another of this program's successes is the publication of the *Constitución Política de los Estados Unidos Mexicanos* (Mexican Constitution) in indigenous languages. Indigenous groups' being ignored is a recurring problem in our country, and the publishing industry is no exception. It is thought —although not thought through— that there is no readership for books in indigenous languages. This is a mistake: *Amatlanahuatili Tlahtoli Tlen. Mexicameh Nechico-listli Sentlanahuatiloan*, the Constitution published in Náhuatl jointly with Fondo de Cultura Económica publishers, quickly sold out and had to be reprinted twice because of its popularity. This is still surprising, though if we take into account that most members of ethnic groups who know how to read in their own language, also read Spanish. There may be some who think —erroneously, in my opinion— that this makes producing works in native lan-

guages pointless. But it should be remembered that creating a truly multicultural state like our own is conceived in the Constitution itself, and can only be achieved by recognizing, promoting, and respecting the identity and dignity of every one of its cultures. Not doing that is the same as condemning them to disappear, or at least to live a segregated life, which is the same as discriminating against these Mexicans.

The Senate also announced it is preparing to translate the Constitution into Maya, Mixtec, Zapotec, and Tzotzil. Given the large number of indigenous languages (364, considering the variants of the main linguistic families), these publications are far from covering the needs of the 10 million Mexican indigenous. Nevertheless, it is a good start, and its symbolic importance should not be underestimated.

Lastly, it is important to point out that, together with Hermanos Porrúa publishers, the Special Commission has also published and reprinted a pocket version of our Constitution in Spanish for mass distribution.



HISTORIC WORKS

Historical complexes, as we all know, are complicated and respond to multiple simultaneous determinants, in which the weft and woof of events intertwine to create unexpected forms subject to diverse readings. In *Soberanía, representación nacional e independencia en 1808* (Sovereignty, National Representation, and Independence in 1808), José Herrera Peña takes a magnifying glass to the crucial moment of independence. The author analyzes the dilemmas that emerged in New Spain because of the crisis on the Iberian Peninsula —“If there's no king, what legitimizes the authority of the viceroy who represents him?” “Should we support Bonaparte, borrow the reins of state to wait for Fernando VII's return, or take advantage of the moment to free ourselves from the yoke of the Spanish?”— leaving nothing as a given and dealing with the events. The author's lively pen makes the text easy reading, making this book, the first of the Senate's silver collection, co-published with the Ministry of Culture of Mexico City's Federal District Government, accessible to all readers.

Semblanzas, memorias y relatos de la Revolución Mexicana en Durango (Depictions, Memoirs, and Stories of the Mexican Revolution in Durango) is another story altogether. If the previous text was sweeping, this one concentrates on a very specific topic. If the former refers to an oft-cited, well-known event, this focuses on figures familiar only to specialists and readers of local history. However, the book's author, Enrique Arrieta Silva, does something more than just give an account of figures like Domingo Arrieta León or Antonio Gaxiola Delgadillo, who were no less important in the revolutionary struggle for being relatively unknown. Arrieta also offers us a lively picture of daily life in the Durango of that period, sprinkled with pleasing anecdotes. In my opinion, this part of the book is its greatest merit, so woefully missing from ordinary historiographies: showing how revolutions are constituted as a slow, constant transformation of the life of a people.

The work *El constitucionalismo mexicano. Influencias continentales y trasatlánticas* (Mexican Constitutionalism. Hemispheric and Transatlantic Influences), written by several specialists and coordinated by Patricia Galeana, exemplifies how history is nourished by a heterogeneous, tangled series of forces. In this case, the authors investigate the way in which the Constitutions of Spain, France, or the United States and the political philosophy that sustains them oriented the creation of the different Constitutions written in our nation. By no means are the paradoxes omitted, nor the difficulties of adapting to the Mexican situation, trying also, in most cases successfully, to not repeat unidirectional causalities.

If we conceive of a country's constitutions as a mirror of its realities and aspirations—always veiled, always oblique, but faithful for he/she who knows how to interpret them—we will have to agree that their review in some dark way

brings together its becoming and direction. It is precisely here that we can pinpoint one of this work's main virtues: not only does it invite us to revisit independence, the reform, and the revolution through the documents produced by each movement, but it also looks to the uncertain future from their standpoint.

With contributions from 17 researchers, *Secularización del Estado y la sociedad* (Seculariza-

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tion of the State and Society) deals with a stage that is essential for understanding our history: the Reform Period. Seen superficially, the reform should not be included in a publishing program dedicated to commemorating the bicentennial of independence and the centennial of the revolution. However, it occupies a natural place in the bibliography covered in this review because without it, our country would be inconceivable. Themes like the relationship between state and churches, the Masons, the Reform Laws, the obligations of the secular state—so often disobeyed in Mexico—fill its pages providing us with a clear—though by no means simple—vision of the falsely paradoxical principle of secularization in a profoundly religious country. Following the tracks of the long, still-current dispute between clerical interests and those of the state, and showing up the links of our secularity and that of equivalent phenomena in Latin America are some of the book's other qualities. Like the previous book, and the two that follow, this text was published jointly with Siglo XXI Editores.

Historia comparada de las Américas. Sus procesos independentistas (Comparative History of the Americas. Its Independence Processes) is a monumental work—more than 30 researchers from the whole hemisphere participate—that is part of an even vaster project coordinated by Dr. Galeana. This second volume reviewed here—the first was published without the participation of the Senate commission—was published together with the UNAM Center for Research on Latin America and the Caribbean (CIALC), the OAS's Pan-American Institute of Geography and History (IPGH), and Siglo XXI Editores. This comparative history reviews the freedom struggles all over the Americas, opening up unsuspected perspectives for the reader. It is not commonly known, for example, that after the United States, Haiti was the first na-



tion to win independence from Europe; that Brazil and Canada freed themselves peacefully from their metropolises; that there was an intense, confused movement of adherences and separations from South America's viceroalties and captaincies; or that the Central American countries formed and disintegrated different political units.

In contrast with similar works, this book has the undoubted merit of surpassing the merely Latin American point of view to integrate into its perspective and comparison the hemisphere's Caribbean and English-speaking countries. This enriches the contrasts and uncovers unsuspected coincidences, surpassing the hackneyed parallelisms that try to forcibly create a Hispanic America more similar to Bolívar's dreams than to reality. From my point of view, this text is one of the program's best.

Doctors Gloria Villegas and Patricia Galeana are the authors of *Dos siglos de México* (Two Centuries of Mexico), a chronology covering 207 years of history (1800-2007). Despite its title, it not only relates the events in Mexico, but in the entire world, beyond just providing a mere *context* for understanding national history. As with any work in which the

information has to be carefully chosen, and given the impossibility of including everything available, some readers may find it odd that certain events are not included and others may disapprove of some of the ones that are. There is no solution for this: it is part of the very nature of the work. However, there are chronologies and then there are chronologies. This one uses well-honed criteria, and content selection has been meticulous. Certainly, it is perfectible, but it should be pointed to as an

extraordinary effort in Mexico's publishing world. Of course, this is a reference work, among other things because, if read straight through, it leaves the reader with an ominous, forlorn impression of our species.

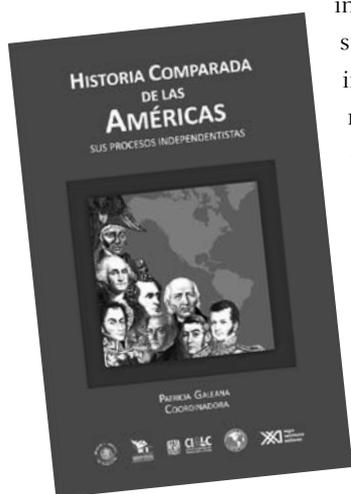
Lastly, *Mujeres insurgentes* (Women Insurgents) introduces the gender perspective into this group of books with a compilation based on the Senate's open call for texts. I think the topic could have been much more developed, but it certainly it is revealing that the participation of women in the fight for independence was included. Despite their social and economic condition, whether they were well known

—Josefa Ortiz, Leona Vicario, Gertrudis Bocanegra— or anonymous, they played a central role in this period, as they have in all others. Recognizing that and repairing their previously being overlooked is a historic debt which only now is there an attempt to repay. It should be recognized that other books besides those reviewed here not only deal with women, but also—and this is no less significant— there may even be more women authors than men.

Lastly, I should underline that the books reviewed here are by no means all those produced by this publishing program. It also includes art books; an exquisite facsimile of the Constitution of Apatzingán preceded by a study by Héctor Fix-Zamudio; works underway about the Mexican Revolution; and others I had to omit because of lack of space.

There are many reasons to praise the way in which the Senate Special Commission in Charge of the Bicentennial of Independence and Centennial of the Mexican Revolution Festivities used its budget to achieve its goal. Some of the most important are that it was able to establish alliances and partnerships to co-publish and disseminate the works. Then, turning its back on a long tradition of centralism, it incorporated in every way the states nationwide, underlining their importance for understanding the country (a special example of this is the chronology *Dos siglos de México*). And, it encouraged works with both a multicultural and a gender perspective; and, of course, its publications are free, as established by law.

Among its failings we should note the lack of children's books, books about Mexico's participation in different international forums and legal instruments, and, lastly, the use of literature (short stories or novels) as a means to disseminate our identity. ■■■



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of the Senate Special Commission
in Charge of the Bicentennial
of Independence and Centennial
of the Mexican Revolution Festivities**