Did NAFTA Rewrite History? Recent Mexican Views of the United States Past

Linda K. Salvucci

Trinity University, lsalvucc@trinity.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/hist_faculty

Part of the History Commons

Repository Citation

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the History Department at Digital Commons @ Trinity. It has been accepted for inclusion in History Faculty Research by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Trinity. For more information, please contact jcostanz@trinity.edu.
up" (to say nothing of the French effort at "total" history), but they do not feel
the political or cultural urgency of writing an all-inclusive history. Thus, while the
political and constitutional struggles (and literary triumphs) of African Americans
receive appropriate treatment in the Mélardri texts, their culture and social identity
are largely neglected. Likewise Mélardri and Portes's discussion of le féminisme in
their chapter on the 1960s is brief to the point of dismissal (a single page), and
the treatment of Asian Americans, Hispanics, and Native Americans is similarly
compressed—it occupies dramatically less space than in most American texts, even
those that do not emphasize social history. As foreign authors writing primarily
for their own students, French academics seem not to have experienced either the
creative stimulus or the political pitfalls posed by the challenge of writing a genuinely
"multicultural" history. Thus, even as French scholars of the United States imbibe
and replicate American scholarship, they remain largely outside the "cultural wars"
that increasingly affect the writing of American textbooks. If nothing else, this
French "style" tells us something about our own intellectual and academic predic-

TEXTBOOKS REVIEWED

Chantiers d’histoire américaine (American history workshop). Ed. by Jean Heffer and François

Histoire des États-Unis depuis 1865 (United States history since 1865). By Pierre Mélardri.

Histoire intérieure des États-Unis au XXe siècle (Domestic history of the United States in the
ISBN 2-225-82269-7.) In French.


Did NAFTA Rewrite History? Recent Mexican Views of the United
States Past

Linda K. Salvucci

As a young graduate student residing in Mexico City in the mid-1970s, I often
wondered what it would be like to teach United States history to university students
there. The challenges appeared formidable. Not only did it seem that anti-
Yankeeism was an integral component of Mexican intellectual identity in the waning
years of Luis Echeverría's presidency, but the major bookstores carried few assignable
(or affordable) titles. A handsomely produced, hardback Spanish version of Samuel
E. Morison and Henry S. Commager's The Growth of the American Republic, first
published in English in 1930, was the only textbook consistently in stock, and there
appeared to be little current work on mainstream topics in United States history
by Mexicans. On subsequent visits to the capital, I encountered a one-volume
Spanish paperback edition of the textbook compiled by Willi Paul Adams, Die
Verenigten Staaten von Amerika, along with relatively less costly Spanish transla-
tions of Alexis de Tocqueville's Democracy in America and a couple of Richard
Hofstadter's books, but not much else. When I lectured at the University of Costa
Rica in 1980, I was informed that the only available textbook in translation was
Carl Degler et al., The Democratic Experience, which was distributed throughout
Latin America, mainly under the auspices of the United States Information Agency
(USIA). Since that time, I have been told that Spanish American university students
of United States history are supposed to be fluent in English and therefore capable
of reading the few prized library copies of untranslated textbooks, such as Bernard
Bailyn et al., The Great Republic. I have also been reminded by colleagues that
my experiences and perceptions are not unique, that they reflect, in the words of
one, "a nearly universal phenomenon" in Latin America.¹

Yet, since 1988, some impressive materials on United States history have been
published by Mexicans in Mexico. For example, a relatively inexpensive, two-volume
paperback collection of essays, Estados Unidos vistos por sus historiadores, contains
extended and thoughtful introductions to carefully chosen excerpts from the writings
of Joyce Appleby, David Weber, Ira Berlin, Norman Graebner, James McPherson,
Eric Foner, James Turner, Walter LaFeber, Martin Sklar, Alan Brinkley, Stephen
Ambrose, and George McT. Kahin.² In the years immediately preceding the North
American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), Mexican intellectuals were comfortable in
approaching the bilateral relationship from a more familiar, less anti-Yankee stance.

Two of those who compiled the collection, Angela Moyano Pahissa and Ana
Rosa Suárez Argüello, are also principal authors of EUA: Síntesis de su historia I,
II, III, which forms about one-third of a far more ambitious and pioneering project
"to understand the life and development of the people of the United States" begun

¹ Samuel E. Morison and Henry S. Commager, Historia de los Estados Unidos de Norteamérica (The growth
of the American republic), trans. Odon Duran d'Ocon and Pastronio Balvye (3 vols., Mexico City, 1951); Willi
Paul Adams, comp., Los Estados Unidos de América (The United States of America), trans. Maximo Cajal and
Pedro Gálvez (Mexico City, 1980); Carl Degler et al., Historia de los Estados Unidos: La experiencia democrática
(History of the United States: The democratic experience), trans. Harold Dies (Mexico City, 1981); Bernard Bailyn

² Victor Adolfo Arriaga Weiss et al., comps., Estados Unidos vistos por sus historiadores (The United States
at the Mora Institute, a publicly supported research center, in 1983. The three
volumes under review here (along with a fourth, covering the post-1960 years, whose
publication is imminent) provide the interpretive core (volumes 8, 9, and 10) of
an extraordinarily comprehensive, eleven-book set, produced by a special team of
Mexican scholars assembled from the country's most prestigious research institutions.
Volumes 1–3 contain some 340 excerpts from "political" documents, while volumes
4–7 offer 436 selections from "socioeconomic" documents. The translation of these
sources into Spanish is a particularly valuable contribution; students throughout
the Hispanic world (including Latino students in the United States) will now be
able to utilize this huge body of primary readings, ranging from standard texts
such as the Mayflower Compact and the Declaration of Independence to less obvious
tracts such as Catherine Moran McNamara's "Irish Life and Nativism in Boston"
and Hugo Münsterberg's "Spirit of U.S. Business." The principles of selection for
these materials are never articulated for the reader; the collection can only be
characterized as an eclectic blend of the traditional, the innovative, and the obscure.
I can think of no comparable assortment in English of so many and varied primary
sources.

As for the subsequent interpretive synthesis, it is difficult to do justice to this
monumental and collective undertaking in a short review. The three volumes provide
less an integrated narrative than a series of discrete essays, with considerable varia-
tions in substance and style. Overall, however, the authors have presented a remark-
ably balanced and densely detailed survey of United States history, informed by
extensive reliance upon many of the standard textbooks and classic monographs
on the American market by 1982. Such familiarity with United States historiography
is not surprising, since many of the writers are part of a new generation of Mexican
professional historians who have lived and studied for advanced degrees in the
United States (as opposed to Europe, where many Mexican historians were previously
trained). Several have published monographs on bilateral relations; for example,
Moyano is the author of México y Estados Unidos: Orígenes de una relación, 1819–
1861. Moreover, since January 1992 the Grupo de Estudios sobre los Estados Unidos
de América has regularly published a bulletin to coordinate and publicize relevant
research activities on both sides of the border. These efforts represent an honest
and unprecedented degree of intellectual curiosity about our nation and our people.
Interestingly, the level-headed, at times detached, even sanitized tone of these
essays on the United States contrasts markedly with the highly controversial, officially
sanctioned textbooks on Mexican history prepared in 1992 for precollegiate students
in Mexico. The intensely politicized debate over these latter materials has been
even more persistent, heated, and substantive than our own current public discussion
of the national history standards.

2 Instituto Dr. José María Luis Mora, BIIA (USA) (11 vols., Mexico City, 1988– ).
3 Angela Moyano Pahissa, México y Estados Unidos: Orígenes de una relación, 1819–1861 (Mexico and the
United States: The origins of a relationship, 1819–1861) (Mexico City, 1983); Boletín del Grupo de Estudios sobre
los Estados Unidos de América (Mexico City).
While there is much that a literate American reader would recognize in BUA’s presentation of the United States past, some emphases are different. The Civil War receives only the briefest of coverage (a scant 25 of 500 pages in the first volume), while the second volume, whose cover features a photograph of Eugene Debs, devotes almost two hundred pages to a “comparative chronology” of the histories of the United States and Mexico from 1492 through 1920. If the intended audience is generally Latin American, then footnotes defining such terms as Menonitas (Mennonites) in the first volume are laudable, while Franklin D. Roosevelt’s fireside chats, unexplained and uncovocatively translated as “charlas junto a la chimenea” in the third volume, must remain puzzling. At times, there is a touch of irony, as when the text steps even beyond revisionism to note that the United States was hardly isolationist in the 1910s and 1920s if the Western Hemisphere, rather than Europe, is the reference point. But mostly the authors play it very straight, telling the story/stories much as their American bibliography does. A personal inscription by one of the authors in a volume I have seen reads that this is United States history “from the Mexican point of view,” but that perspective is far less in evidence and far less sustained than one might anticipate.

Treatment of even sensitive issues is remarkably measured. For example, the matter-of-fact definition of Manifest Destiny concludes succinctly that the concept “implied a racist attitude.” The short discussion of the battle at the Alamo is dignified rather than defensive in tone, rebutting the perception of Mexican “cruelty” in executing the defenders by pointing out that they had violated the Mexican prohibition on foreigners’ bringing weapons into Texas in the first place; for breaking that law (and others), they were branded as traitors and treated accordingly. The most unrestrained prose characterizes the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo as “the best deal in its [the United States'] history and its most shameful imperialist adventure,” a sentiment that probably few American academics would contest. Overall, the prose is less partisan and heavy-handed than that in reciprocal accounts in some United States textbooks on the secondary and collegiate markets.

Although there are several references to “Latin American readers” and United States history “for and by Mexicans,” the intended audience remains elusive. Even before the current round of peso devaluations, this eleven-volume set was out of the price range of Mexican university students; in any event, it is not sold in the principal bookstores in Mexico City. Moreover, it appears that relatively few university students in Mexico ever study United States history. At the National University of Mexico (Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, or UNAM), only about 50 of some 50,000 students currently enroll in the year-long course in American history. Other public campuses, such as the Metropolitan University at Acatlán (Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, or UAM), and much smaller private universities, such as the Iberoamerican University and the University of the Americas in Puebla, show

5 Ibid., I, 432, 442.
vigorou intellectual activity and interest on the part of their faculties, but the
number of students appears to be small. At the prestigious College of Mexico,
those three dozen or so students apt to sign up for the course in United States
tory that is offered biennially are usually master's degree candidates in interna-
tional relations, while the vigorous research agenda at CIDE (Centro de Investigación
y Docencia Económicas, in English, Center for Economic Investigation and
Teaching) likewise seems driven by interest in modern American politics and the
bilateral relationship. In this context, the emphasis on the twentieth century in
EUA is understandable; it also corresponds to the tendency of American textbook
authors to devote more and more attention to the recent past. Perhaps the projected
audience (for a 10,000 print run) is really a nonspecialized class of Mexican university
graduates from a wide range of professions.

In sum, EUA represents a serious, sustained, and fresh effort to understand the
United States and its people by an accomplished and informed team of scholars.
This massive project relies to an unprecedented degree on primary and secondary
sources from the United States, while the careful tone effectively eliminates many
of the cultural stereotypes and categories evident in previous works. Although there
is an active community of Mexicanists engaged in specialized research and university
teaching in the United States, no broad effort comparable to EUA exists here to
understand Mexico and its peoples, even among educated Americans. Logic might
dictate that such an effort is necessary, given the increasing integration of our
economies, cultures, and populations.

TEXTBOOKS REVIEWED

EUA 8: Síntesis de su historia, 1 (USA, vol. 8: Synthesis of its history, 1). Ed. by Angela Moyano,

EUA 9: Síntesis de su historia, 2 (USA, vol. 9: Synthesis of its history, 2). Ed. by Cristina González
968-6382-48-8 / set.) In Spanish.

EUA 10: Síntesis de su historia, 3 (USA, vol. 10: Synthesis of its history, 3). Ed. by Víctor Godínez
Marcelo, Pedro Javier González, Angela Moyano Pabissa, Alma Laura Parra Campos, Patricia
de los Ríos, and Ana Rosa Suárez Argüello. (Mexico City: Instituto Mora, 1991. 534 pp. Paper,

Those wishing to purchase these volumes should contact the Instituto de Investigaciones, Dr.
José María Mora, Plaza Valentín Gómez Farías 12, San Juan 03730, México, D.F.