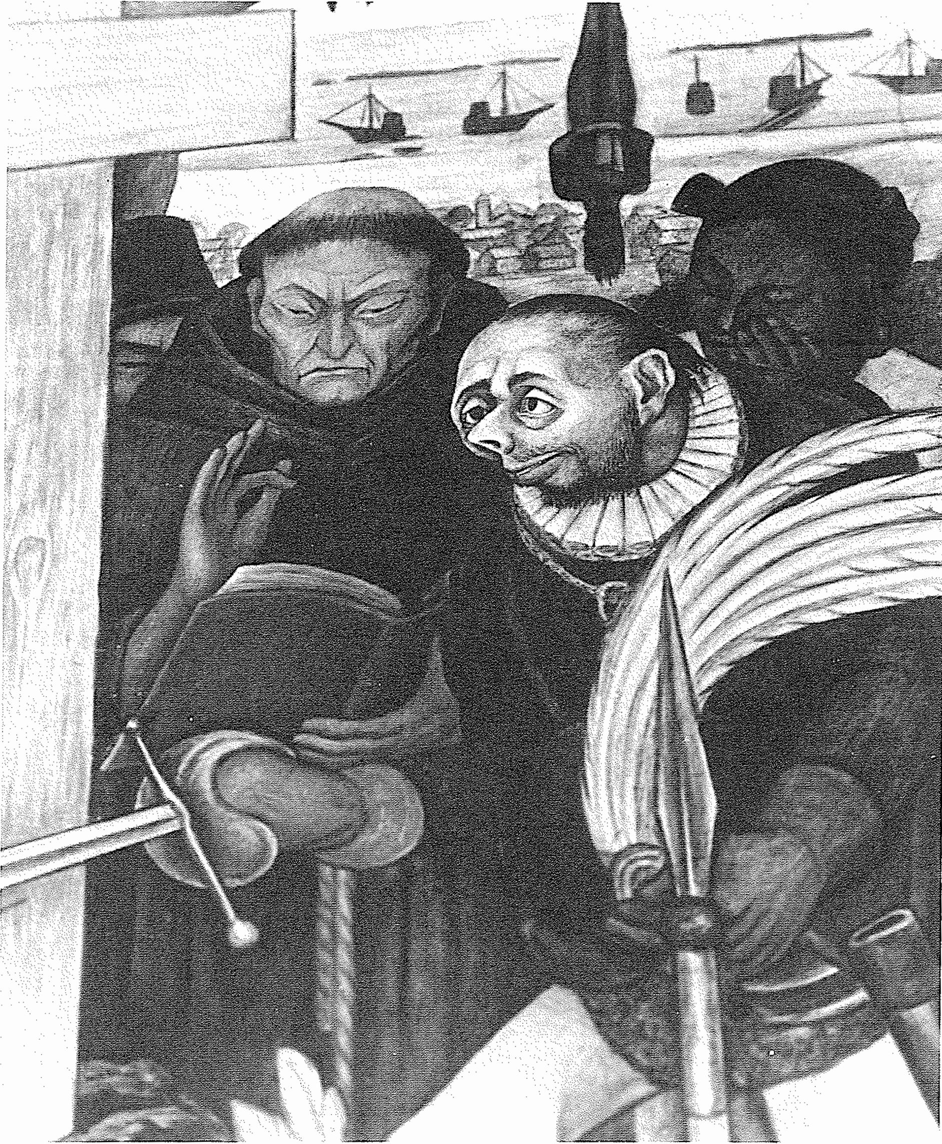


Courtesy of the Mexican government.

The Spanish Conquest in 1521 did not eradicate Mexico's Indian heritage. Today, a bronze statue of the defeated Aztec emperor, Cuauhtémoc ("Falling Eagle"), adorns the center of Mexico City. There are several well-known paintings of the victorious Spaniard, Hernán Cortés. The most popular (above) is by muralist Diego Rivera, who depicts the great Conquistador as a cross-eyed, syphilitic hunchback.

Mexico lost one-half of its national territory to the United States in the 19th century; two years ago, vast new oil and gas deposits were discovered under the land Mexico was allowed to keep. Now Washington hopes Mexico can supply as much as 10 percent (1 million barrels per day) of U.S. petroleum imports, while Mexican leaders hope steady oil revenues will help them buy time to put their own house in order. Two-thirds of Mexico's 68 million people live in poverty; each year, hundreds of thousands of them look for work north of the Rio Grande. Inflation, corruption, and political repression worry the nation's otherwise comfortable middle class. Some Mexican officials—and foreign diplomats—suggest privately that Mexico could become "another Iran." Here, journalist Marlise Simons looks at daily life in modern Mexico; historian Peter Smith examines Mexico's progress since the 1910 Revolution; and political scientist Richard Fagen ponders the present state of U.S.-Mexican relations.

THE PEOPLE NEXT DOOR

by Marlise Simons

"I can think of no people in the West who are as strange to Americans as the Mexicans are," John Womack, a visiting Harvard historian, commented recently. "They are as different from us as the Vietnamese or the Japanese. But in the case of Mexico, Americans don't know about the difference."

The United States has Sinologists and Kremlinologists aplenty, but, until lately, the "Mexicanist" in the U.S. government has been a rare bird. American newspaper readers know more about Moscow's political machinations than about Mexico City's; more about Mao Tse-tung's revolution in 1945 than about Mexico's in 1910.

Such ignorance is perhaps [illegible] le. To an American [illegible] to Juárez airport, [illegible] tion struggling up the economic ladder. Middle-class Mexicans aspire to American-style homes and imported sports cars, and a U.S. tourist would feel at home among the crowded billboards and gaudy neon signs advertising Pizza Hut and Kentucky Fried Chicken. Three and one-half million cars and trucks clog the nation's modern roads; 5 million television sets provide reruns of "Kojak" and "The Bionic Woman."

A Mestizo Nation

Yet as Octavio Paz, Mexican poet and essayist, has written, the country's "occidentalism" is essentially a mask. "The impression we create," he observed, "is much like that created by Orientals. They too—the Chinese, the Hindus, the Arabs—are hermetic and indecipherable. They too carry about with them, in rags, a still-living past."

The Mexicans are *mestizos*, a mixed race, and the Indian part of the mix has ultimately proved stronger than the Spanish. Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, and Guatemala all have proportionately larger Indian populations than Mexico, but they are ruled by white Hispanic elites. In Mexico, less than 5 percent of the population is pure European; 70 percent is *mestizo*. The Spanish *conquistadores* were able to impose their language (90 percent of Mexico's 68 million people speak Spanish), their religion (96 percent of the population is Catholic), and their legal system on Indian Mexico. But the country's Indian character prevailed; that was Montezuma's true revenge.

It is no coincidence, then, that Argentinians and Chileans in Mexico contend that they are not really in *Latin* America at all, while Indonesians and Pakistanis say they feel somehow right at home. Mexico in turn looks down on its southern neighbors. Long ruled by civilians, the Mexicans feel superior to the military juntas and crude dictatorships of Central and South America.

Marlise Simons, 38, has reported on Mexico and Central America for the Washington Post *and* Newsweek *since 1971 and is a correspondent for* De Nieuwe Rotterdamse Courant *in The Netherlands. A Dutch citizen, she is a graduate of Amsterdam University (1961). From 1965 to 1971 she was a reporter for the* Times of London *based in New York. She received the Latin American Studies Association's award for "distinguished reporting" for her coverage of the 1973 coup in Chile.*

BREAKFAST AT SANBORNS

Perhaps no one has depicted daily life in Mexico as aptly as novelist Carlos Fuentes (The Death of Artemio Cruz, Terra Nostra), *Mexico's one-time ambassador to France and a former Wilson Center Fellow. The following is from his latest book,* The Hydra Head, *a novel of political intrigue.*

Felix Maldonado attended a political breakfast every morning. A pretext for exchanging impressions, ordering world affairs, plotting intrigue, conspiring, and organizing cabals. Small early-morning fraternities that serve, above all, as a source of information that would otherwise remain unknown. . . . He said to himself that no one would ever understand the articles and editorials if he was not a devoted regular at the hundreds of political breakfasts celebrated daily in chains of American-style quick-food restaurants—Sanborns, Wimpys, Dennys, Vips. . . . But how odd it was to find himself in the Sanborns on Madero. . . . Like the nation, he mused, this city had both developed and underdeveloped areas. Frankly, he didn't care for the latter. The old center was a special case. If you kept your eyes above the swarming crowds, you didn't have to focus on all the misery and poverty but could, instead, enjoy the beauty of certain facades and roof lines. The Templo de la Profesa, for example, was very beautiful, as well as the Convento de San Francisco and the Palacio de Iturbide, all of red volcanic stone, with their baroque facades of pale marble. Felix reflected that this was a city designed for gentlemen and slaves, whether Aztec or Spaniard, never for the indecisive muddle of people who'd recently abandoned the peasant's white shirt and pants and the worker's blue denim to dress so badly, imitating middle-class styles but, at best, only half successfully. The Indians, so handsome in the lands of their origin, so slim and spotless and secret, in the city became ugly, filthy, and bloated by carbonated drinks. . . .

Translated by Margaret Sayers Peden. Translation Copyright © 1978 by Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, Inc. Used by permission.

Because Mexico identifies so little with Latin America, its people tend to look North. Indeed, Mexicans seem obsessed by the United States. The Mexican press devotes sizeable amounts of front-page space to its powerful neighbor, although U.S. newspapers rarely return the compliment. The Mexicans, who see 3 million well-heeled *yanqui* tourists every year, not to mention imported U.S. movies and television shows, perceive Americans as garishly dressed, uncultured, spiritually poor. Mexicans seem to disdain what they envy, dislike the things that fascinate them most.

The affluent may ski in Colorado, shop in Dallas, and send their children to study science and economics at Harvard or

M.I.T. But excluding a small clique of traveled authors, academics, and diplomats—people like Carlos Fuentes and Octavio Paz—Mexico's thinkers, writers, painters, and editors do not speak English and look on Americans with suspicion or scorn. English is taught in Mexican high schools with less success than Spanish in U.S. schools. "I refuse to speak the language of the empire," says historian Gastón García Cantu, "It's easier not to be contaminated that way."

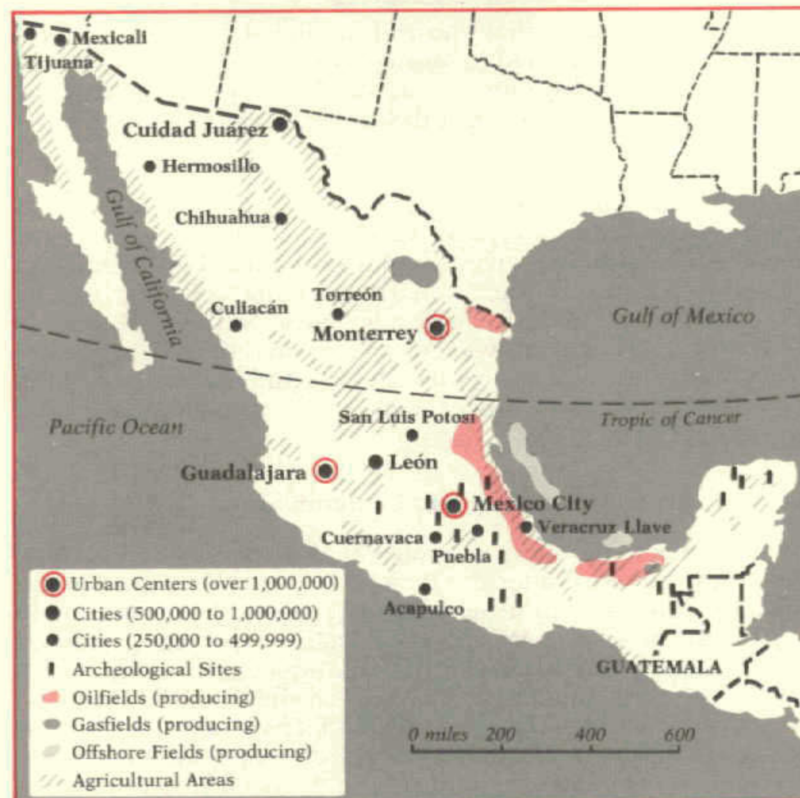
While the "gringo" possesses the wealth the Mexican covets, Americans are too abrupt and forthright in their manner to please people who take pains to avoid giving offense. The Anglo-Saxon virtues of punctuality, honesty, and brevity are of dubious value to Mexicans. Social intercourse requires the Oriental ritual that permits a display of personal dignity and mutual respect. A visitor to a banker, businessman, or government official may find the conversation beginning with his health, his wife, his children, his holiday—and only then learn that his loan has been denied, his equipment order canceled, his permit revoked.

Reliving Defeat

Rigorous as Mexico's social rituals seem, they are also precarious. Someone not worthy of attention may be icily ignored by bureaucrats, courts, or anyone with a favor to give or a service to perform. With regard to individual rights, the Mexican police, ogres to those citizens without influence, display a haughty disregard in keeping with Mexico's long authoritarian tradition.* Charges that police commonly abduct and extort, make random arrests, keep people incommunicado, and beat or torture common criminals and political prisoners alike appear daily in the newspapers. There is little government reaction. There is a standard rationale for police abuse, which a high government official once explained to me: "Mexicans are not used to telling the truth. Our culture does not demand that. If police only asked questions, they would never get anywhere."

Few countries are as haunted by their history as this southern stretch of North America. Mexicans spend their lives, the Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges once noted, "contemplating the past." They morbidly relive their past defeats, diplomatic and military. The press (Mexico City alone has 21 daily newspapers) regularly interviews the few living veterans of the 1910

*Mexico has about a dozen different police forces, including federal police, traffic police, and secret police. Each has earned a distinctive, often rude, nickname. Traffic cops, for example, are called *mordelones*, from *morder*, "to bite," i.e., to bribe.



Mexico, three times the size of Texas and rich in natural resources, is facing a Malthusian challenge, despite the Green Revolution in agriculture. The country's population, now 68 million, is growing by between 3.2 and 3.6 percent annually (5.0 percent in cities, 2.0 percent in the countryside). Some 63 percent of all Mexicans live in urban areas. Because of Mexico's rugged terrain—massive mountain ranges run parallel to each coast and meet south of Mexico City—good farm land is scarce. Arable land per capita is about one acre, half the U.S. figure.

Revolution, the participants in past political scandals, the aging eyewitnesses to fraud, treason, and civil war.

Mexican politicians, intellectuals, and plain people still pick at the scabs of history, still struggle to assimilate the impact of the Spanish Conquest in 1521, which crushed Mexico's ancient culture. The European concept of the Old World and the New World does not exist in a land that, before the Conquest, had cities like Tenochtitlán, Cholula, and Texcoco, more popu-

lous and magnificent than those of Spain itself. Columbus Day, as such, is not celebrated in Mexico. Not long ago, a wreath was placed at the Columbus statue on Mexico City's bustling, modern Reforma Avenue, but the message read: "1492, the first meeting of two sister races." In other words: "We were here first."

Despite their fierce chauvinism, Mexicans would be hard pressed to describe a "typical" countryman. There are so many Mexicos. Middle class wives shop in stores supplied with a cornucopia of familiar American brand names: Kellogg's, Del Monte, Colgate. Yet the mountain people of Nayarit still pray in a cave for a sick person's wandering soul, and the somber, introverted inhabitants of the central deserts and highlands seem to have little in common with the cheerful, easygoing Caribbean folk of Veracruz.

Hospitality and Contemplation

Foreigners have long marveled at Mexico's cultural variety. But it was not until after the Revolution that the country's artists and scholars, then its government, turned their attention to the Indian heritage pervading Mexico's society, its geometric and stylized art, its familiar foods, its etiquette, its architecture. (There are 20,000 potential archeological sites in Mexico, though only a handful have been excavated.) The Indian heritage is present in the honors rendered to a guest, in the fiestas and sense of ritual, in the contempt for death, and, above all, in the Mexican penchant for contemplation, which Americans commonly misinterpret as passivity.

But the Indians are admired only in the abstract; real Indians are widely disdained. Although many scholars and social workers have dedicated their lives to improving the Indians' lot, it is not an easy task. The Indians have stoutly refused to meet 20th-century Mexico halfway, even spurning routine vaccinations for TB, typhoid, and measles in favor of home-grown cures. For their part, "modern" Mexicans take a patronizing attitude toward the Indians, when they are not overtly hostile. The government devotes much benevolent rhetoric and much money to the "Indian problem"; yet calling someone an "indio," meaning dirty, stupid, and lazy, is a serious insult.

Six million Mexican Indians, almost 10 percent of the country's population, speak no Spanish. They comprise 73 different ethnic groups. Humiliated and driven to the inhospitable southern highlands by whites and *mestizos* (the mountains of Oaxaca and Chiapas harbor the largest Indian communities in the

Americas), the Indians turned inward, preserving much of their tribal, linguistic, and religious cohesion.

Mexico is a foreign country to them. They still wear traditional clothing with highly symbolic designs—although transistor radios in their shoulderbags are no longer unusual. Yet Tzeltales, Tepehuanos, and Tarascos, to name but a few, barely know of one another's existence, and if they met, they could not communicate. Officially, 58 Indian languages are still spoken in Mexico, but there are so many offshoots that some 150 languages and dialects are mutually unintelligible. The fast high-pitched tonal languages heard in the Indian markets reminds one of the Orient, even though scholars have yet to uncover any certain links with Asian tongues.

To some extent, the travail of these Indian peoples is that of all of rural Mexico. In the southern state of Chiapas alone, where the wealthy own most of the arable land, 2.3 percent of the population produces 52 percent of the marketable agricultural goods, primarily coffee and cotton. The landed gentry live in feudal style on their *haciendas*; many own private planes, have bodyguards, and maintain luxurious homes in the nearest town. Their property is usually secure; they have given bribes to the local army captain, or, more openly, have invited his troops to graze horses on their land. The rest of the rural population lives off subsistence farming. One-third of Chiapas' workforce, mostly highland Indians, move down to the coast every December, where parents and children alike pick coffee and cotton for three harsh months.

An Urban Monster

Mexico has about 80,000 rural communities with fewer than 5,000 inhabitants, and they rank low on the government's list of priorities. Planners argue that it takes too much money to bring water, electricity, and roads to such small communities. Yet the result of neglect appears to be even more costly. In search of work, education, or some vague hope of self-improvement, millions of peasants have moved to Mexico's great urban centers: Guadalajara, Monterrey, Mexico City.

Greater Mexico City is an urban monster with some 14 million people packed into an area about half the size of New York City. One of the world's oldest capitals, it has long ceased to be manageable. Situated in a high valley (7,400 feet above sea level) once the site of a magnificent lake, it is now chronically short of water. Except for the beautiful Spanish colonial center, studded with skyscrapers, the city has a low, drab, and

TWO WORLDS

The United States and Mexico are divided by 2,000 years of history as well as 2,000 miles of border. In The Labyrinth of Solitude *(1950), Octavio Paz, the Mexican writer, philosopher, and former ambassador to India, describes the contrasts in the two national characters:*

The North Americans are credulous, and we are believers; they love fairy tales and detective stories, and we love myths and legends. The Mexican tells lies because he delights in fantasy, or because he is desperate, or because he wants to rise above the sordid facts of his life; the North American does not tell lies, but he substitutes social truth for the real truth, which is always disagreeable. We get drunk in order to confess; they get drunk in order to forget. They are optimists, and we are nihilists—except that our nihilism is not intellectual but instinctive, and therefore irrefutable. We are suspicious, and they are trusting. We are sorrowful and sarcastic, and they are happy and full of jokes. North Americans want to understand, and we want to contemplate. They are activists, and we are quietists; we enjoy our wounds, and they enjoy their inventions. They believe in hygiene, health, work, and contentment, but perhaps they have never experienced true joy, which is an intoxication, a whirlwind. In the hubbub of a fiesta night, our voices explode into brilliant lights, and life and death mingle together, while their vitality becomes a fixed smile that denies old age and death but that changes life to motionless stone.

What is the origin of such contradictory attitudes? It seems to me that North Americans consider the world to be something that can be perfected, and that we consider it to be something that can be redeemed. Like their Puritan ancestors, we believe that sin and death constitute the ultimate basis of human nature, but with the difference that the Puritan identifies purity with health. Therefore he believes in the purifying effects of asceticism, and the consequences are his cult of work for work's sake, his serious approach to life, and his conviction that the body does not exist or at least cannot lose—or find—itself in another body. Every contact is a contamination. Foreign races, ideas, customs, and bodies carry within themselves the germs of perdition and impurity. Social hygiene complements that of the soul and the body. Mexicans, however, both ancient and modern, believe in communion and fiestas: there is no health without contact. Tlazolteotl, the Aztec goddess of filth and fecundity, of earthly and human moods, was also the goddess of steam baths, sexual love, and confession. And we have not changed very much, for Catholicism is also communion.

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seemingly endless skyline. Public transport is inadequate; as a result, nearly 2 million private cars create permanent traffic jams, and add to the heavy industrial pollution that on most days blocks out the view of the two snowcapped volcanoes some 15 miles away. It is not unusual for a worker to take two hours to get from his suburb or slum to his job. Not surprisingly, the *Chilangos*, as the city's inhabitants are known, get pushy and irritable at rush hour.

Parachutists

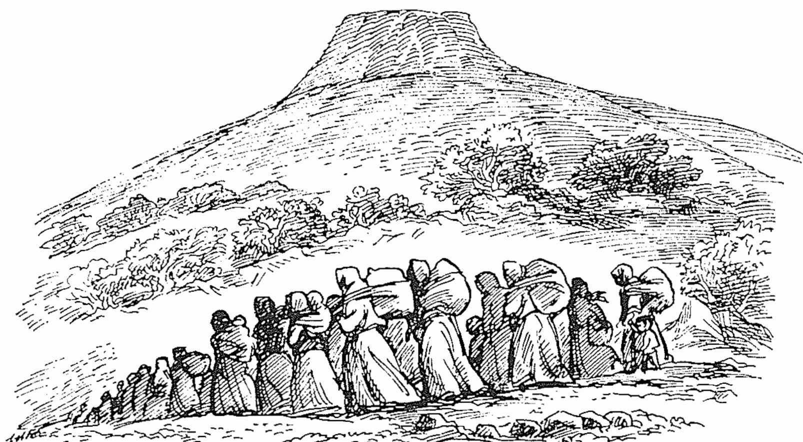
Mexico City boasts the country's largest slum, Nezahualcoyotl, named after the 15th-century poet-king who once ruled the area. "Neza," as Mexicans usually call it, has 2.6 million inhabitants. Newcomers move in with relatives at the rate of 6,000 per month. The men start hunting for odd jobs. If they are lucky, their children may go to elementary or even high school and their grandchildren may join the lower-middle or even the middle class.

Along with its unpaved streets and dilapidated housing, Neza has schools, clinics, and moviehouses, unlike many of the Federal District's 3,500 "illegal" neighborhoods. The "illegals" result from landgrabs staged by families of "parachutists"—people who invade vacant lots, after nightfall, with cardboard, wood, and corrugated iron. By daybreak they have built their shacks; it is a challenge to move them out. Eventually they start pressuring City Hall for water, electricity, and other municipal services.

At the other end of the scale are the country's numerous millionaires and industrial barons. Mexico's wealthy are able to live in comfortable isolation, largely untroubled by social deterioration or by the Catholic consciences that most profess to have. Their concerns appear to be monitoring the investment climate, the availability of servants, and frequent trips abroad.

Industrialists have been pampered with protective tariff barriers, low taxes, controlled wages, and heavily subsidized gas, oil, and electricity. The leaders of the business community have easy access to the President and his ministers, and the government's important economic decisions are usually not made without consulting key businessmen.* When this consul-

*Many Mexican politicians have substantial business investments of their own, but it is rare for businessmen to become openly involved in politics. In the United States top corporation executives are routinely appointed to Cabinet positions (W. Michael Blumenthal of Bendix, for example, as Treasury Secretary); such a "revolving door" has no counterpart in Mexico.



From Life and Death in Milpa Alta: A Nahuatl Chronicle of Diaz and Zapata *translated by Fernando Horcasitas. © 1972 by the University of Oklahoma Press.*

tation failed to occur during the final years of the Echeverría regime (1970–76), it drove businessmen to virtual mutiny. They organized strikes, took $4 billion out of the country, and precipitated the collapse of the peso in 1976.

Business magnates are not the only ones who can withhold support to great effect. Mexico's leaders realize that dangers lie in the rising expectations, inflated by the prospect of oil revenues, of the urban middle class. "This is where a major political threat lies in Mexico," a senior official in the labor ministry commented. "The middle classes are fed up with high prices, taxes, and political controls. They don't feel represented by the government."

In *Gobernación* (Ministry of Government), Mexico's political nerve center and the agency charged with stifling domestic dissent, there is keen awareness that a larger share of the pie must be given to the middle classes to keep social peace. The widespread 1968 protest movements, which culminated with the killing of some 300 people (students, housewives, workers) by the army during a political meeting in Mexico City, derived their strength from the disgruntled bourgeoisie, not from the poor or disadvantaged.

Gobernación also fears the increasingly militant labor unions, made up of miners, oil workers, bus drivers and others. Since the 1930s, organized labor, centered around the giant *Confederación de Trabajadores de México*, has been a bulwark of successive regimes; labor leaders often hold both union and

government positions. But in the last few years, a number of "independent" unions have tried, with limited success, to break away from their alliance with government, now that alternatives, such as the new leftist parties and the old (but only recently legalized) Communist Party, are available.

To channel discontent into the political arena, the government has devised reforms to assure opposition parties of one-fourth of the seats in Mexico's rubber-stamp Congress. The much-cited oil bonanza is buying vital time, not only for the nation's economy, but, above all, for the political system, which, though unabashedly authoritarian, has shown surprising pragmatism by remaining flexible. It has survived so long because it managed to adjust to pressures whenever necessary.

Part of the key to this flexibility lies in the special prestige of the Office of the President. A Mexican President has powers that far exceed those of the man in the White House; he is revered like an 18th-century monarch. When El Señor Presidente visits a rural town, people paint their homes, scrub the streets, and try to bring him their private petitions. Within this highly centralized, paternalistic system, the President's role is to balance the interest groups: business; labor; peasants; foreign investors; the bureaucracy; the military. All of these groups lobby top officials directly, by-passing the virtually powerless Congress.

An Electoral Machine

Business leaders stayed home last March, for example, when the official *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (PRI), which controls Congress, celebrated its 50th anniversary; they know that the party is *used* by power but never *exercises* it. The PRI is a political-administrative machine, a self-perpetuating job agency, a political playing field. It is an electoral machine without parallel in Latin America.

Undeniably, the PRI's blatant corruption, its stuffing and stealing of ballot boxes, has undermined its effectiveness. Most Mexicans have "corruption stories," which range from crossing a bureaucrat's palm to get a liquor license to paying a kickback to senior officials in return for a juicy government pipeline contract. A post office worker may buy his "window" for $200 and it can cost up to $4,000 in bribes to the PEMEX *(Petróleos Mexicanos)* union to get a lucrative job in the state-run oil industry. Officials also appoint friends and relatives to cushy or nonexistent advisory positions. Such appointees are known as "aviators" because they only land in the office to collect their paychecks.

THE CHURCH

The Church in Mexico occupies a delicate political position. Alexander Wilde, a research associate in the Wilson Center's Latin American Program, comments:

During Pope John Paul II's January 1979 visit, Mexico briefly seemed to be what in fact it is: the second largest (after Brazil) Roman Catholic nation in the world. The massive popular turnout for the Pontiff was an embarrassment to the regime, which has been officially anti-clerical for more than 50 years; by and large, the Church in Mexico has been greatly circumscribed.

Catholicism arrived with the *conquistadores,* and within a dozen years gave Mexico one of its enduring symbols: the miraculous Virgin of Guadalupe. Under her banner, the priest Hidalgo rallied Indian armies against the Spanish in 1810, while the Church hierarchy remained loyal to Spain. Since Independence, anti-clericalism has been a recurrent theme in politics. The Church lost its extensive landholdings following Juárez's *Reforma* of the 1850s. After the 1910 Revolution, the Calles government turned strongly against the Church. For more than three years during the 1920s—the period captured vividly in novelist Graham Greene's *The Power and the Glory*—Catholic schools were closed, no Masses were said, and peasant armies of *cristeros* sought, unsuccessfully, to defend the rights of the Church.

Since the *cristero* revolt, the Church has generally accepted a restricted, traditional role. A pre–Vatican II mentality persists, disturbed but not transformed by such figures as the "Red Bishop" of Cuernavaca, Sergio Méndez Arceo (called Méndez *Ateo*—"the atheist"—by his detractors). Liberation Theology, nurtured by military repression elsewhere in Latin America, finds few adherents in a country saturated with the regime's own revolutionary rhetoric. While attendance at Sunday Mass is low, the Church remains a cultural redoubt, educating a conservative elite (one-quarter of the country's high school students), and fostering popular piety, with its magical and Indian elements, among the rural poor.

Because of such widespread venality, and the state's heavy role in the economy, the fastest way to the top, to money and power, lies not in private enterprise but in politics. To be sure, Mexico's government has many idealistic teachers, nurses, doctors, engineers, and agronomists, but the pervasive aura of corruption blinds many Mexicans to the regime's better side. Tax evasion, Mexico's national sport, is invariably justified with the rhetorical question: Why pay money that disappears into politicians pockets?

The task confronting Mexico is to find a dignified route out of underdevelopment. In theory, Mexico's economic planners reject both what they see as the stifling inefficiencies of Eastern European socialism and the crass, callous path of Western capitalism. But the latter remains the likely route, for in fact, it has already been chosen. Despite their populist rhetoric, most Mexican leaders believe that seeking economic efficiency is the only practical path to social justice; as they see it, state-supported capitalism will create new wealth that will eventually trickle down to the bottom of society. So far, however, the effect of Mexico's economic advance has been to funnel great wealth to a minority, while, according to the government's own figures, only one-third of Mexico's 67 million people can afford adequate diets and some 40 percent suffer from outright malnutrition.

Even if the flow of oil dollars does raise the standard of living for many Mexicans, pessimists fear the quality of life will deteriorate. "I am very worried about the official tendency to think only about expanding the consumer market," says Rodolfo Stavenhagen, a leading Mexico City anthropologist. "It is not necessary that we lose our culture, that we break down family life, lose our artisans, our very identity in the name of progress." Already Mexican pottery is making way for plastic jars, its fresh food for canned vegetables, its fruit for soda pop and junk food. Uncontrolled industrialization has made Mexico City the most polluted metropolis in the world.

In Mexico, these days, a prominent local writer told me recently, "The bankers, the businessmen, the oil engineers, are close to euphoria. But they know little about our society. The specialists who pay close attention to our agriculture, education, employment, nutrition—they are all deep pessimists. Things are bad now and the population will double in a few decades. I try not to think in apocalyptic terms. At best, we may become a cheap imitation of the industrialized West today—and at that, long after the West has abandoned the consumer values Mexican politicians are now fighting for."