Mexico

BIOGRAPHY OF POWER

A History of Modern Mexico, 1810–1996

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For Isabel, León, and Daniel
History endures in Mexico. No one has died here, despite the killings and the executions. They are alive—Cuauhtémoc, Cortés, Maximilian, Don Porfirio, and all the conquerors and all the conquered. That is Mexico's special quality. The whole past is a pulsing present. It has not gone by, it has stopped in its tracks.

—José Moreno Villa

Providence willed my history to be the history of Mexico since 1821

—Antonio López de Santa Anna
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"Jerusalem needs a psychoanalyst," the Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai said to me one autumn evening in 1989, as we looked out a window of his home at one of the walls of that city. His words made me think of another ancient city, as scored and burdened by the past as his Jerusalem. Immersed in a present of tensions and conflicts that sometimes appear insoluble, both cities have been the site of mythical pilgrimages, theological revelations, and historical conquests. Both still show signs of the different cultures that have inhabited them. And both cities once saw themselves as the center of the world. “Mexico,” I thought, “The city and the nation could also use a psychoanalyst.”

This book is not a psychoanalysis of Mexico or a psychohistory of its “representative men.” But it is a history of Mexico in which the principal protagonist is history itself—the many forms in which the past has not disappeared but has persisted within the memories and day-to-day reality of the Mexican people. The weight of the past has sometimes been more present than the present itself. And a repetition of the past has sometimes seemed to be the only foreseeable future. In certain areas of Mexican life, the past has survived as a legacy of stability and cohesion; at other levels it exists in the form of unresolved, partially repressed conflicts, always ready to burst through the surface of the present. And in Mexico, as in all countries with ancient cultures, our view of the past that was actually experienced is influenced by the past as it came to be remembered, reconstructed, and sometimes, for ideological purposes, invented. One of the duties of a historian is to separate the past as it was from all the superimpositions of imagination.

The formative period of Mexican history was the century and a half (1600–1750) known as the Era of the Baroque. The initial cycle of
material and spiritual conquest, which had begun in 1521 with the arrival of Hernán Cortés, was more or less over. The country was in the process of creating the fundamental characteristics of its culture, a complete body of values (in life, art, ethics, and in intellectual, political, and religious forms) stemming from the mixture of Indian and Spanish elements. New Spain—thanks to mostly Indian hands and mostly Spanish concepts—gradually developed into a multicolored Mexican mosaic of customs and traditions. This process of mestizaje ("racial mixing") is absolutely central to the history of Mexico. No other country in the Americas experienced so inclusive a process. In Mexico, mestizaje was not only ethnic but intensely cultural. It permeated every area of life and became the framework and substance of a society that is in many ways both an innovation and an experiment.

During this Baroque Era, New Spain remained a society immersed in its own creation. It would prove resistant to the political and intellectual currents of the European Enlightenment that reached Mexico at the end of the eighteenth century. New Spain would be suspicious of the outside world and poorly prepared to embrace the new values proposed by western Europe. "Mexico was born with its back turned," the poet Octavio Paz has written. Its back was turned to the modern world, toward which the country born in 1821 could only aspire, while steadily and nostalgically looking toward a past that reluctantly it would have to renounce (at least in part). Beginning with the War of Independence (1810–1821), Mexico—or more precisely its elite leadership—essentially became a being with two faces, one assuming that a return to the past was possible, the other yearning to wipe it all out and begin anew.

Mexico's problems in establishing a firm connection with the modern world are rooted in certain traditions, especially in what might be termed its theological-political framework. The concentration of power in the hands of one person has been a phenomenon all too common in Latin American societies (and elsewhere), but in its specifically Mexican manifestation both the Indian and Spanish traditions have come into play. Mingling characteristics from both sources, a peculiar type of leadership has developed in Mexico, less connected to the person of a particular leader than to the institution of personal power. Combining two traditions of absolute power—one emanating from the gods and the other from God—this political mestizaje conferred a unique connection with the sacred on Mexico's succession of rulers. The European revolutions of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were carried out in the name of some idea, some ideology, some "ism." In Mexico the suffix ismo finds its most important political
usage linked to a man of power: Juarismo, Porfirismo, Zapatismo, Cardenismo, Salinismo.

This book threads the lives of the most important leaders during the last two centuries into a single biography of power, but I am in no way subscribing to an outmoded (and unacceptable) great-man theory of history. What I hope to convey is that in Mexico the lives of these men do more than represent the complexities and contradictions of the country they came to govern or in which they took center stage for a time at the head of armies fighting for change or for a return to the past (or for both). The accidents of their individual lives also had an enormous effect on the directions taken by the nation as a whole. Personal characteristics and events that in a moderately democratic country might be mere anecdotes—interesting, amusing, or trivial—can in Mexico acquire unsuspected dimensions and significance. An early psychological frustration, a physical defect, a family drama, a confused prejudice, a tilt one way or the other in a man’s religious feelings or his passions, even a local tradition automatically accepted could literally alter the fate of Mexico, for better or for worse. Biography is a genre that has not been much cultivated in Spanish and Spanish-American culture. Mexico is no exception, and this seems to me a strange thing, given the personal impact of men like these leaders on all aspects of national life. It is this long-lasting historical reality on which I have based my approach in a book that is essentially a political history of the last two centuries in Mexico.

Each section has a different theme. Each is written in a somewhat different (and I hope appropriate) style. The introduction centers on a single event, the lavish celebration of the centenary of Mexican independence in 1910 by the government of the aged dictator Porfirio Díaz, and it offers a rapid cross section of Mexico in that year, at the very threshold of the great Revolution. Part 1, “The Weight of the Past,” is descriptive and analytical, presenting the five major leitmotifs of Mexican history, which spiral and return throughout the book. From then on narrative takes over. In part 2, “Century of Caudillos,” history unfolds at a classical pace, with the kind of elaboration characteristic of the nineteenth century itself. In “The Revolution” (part 3) the rhythm of events and the writing changes, racing along rather like the Revolutionary caudillos themselves on horseback at the head of their troops. With “The Modern State” (part 4), Mexican history moves toward a stasis and I try to combine narration with an explanation of the unique formation, structure, and rise of the modern Mexican system. The final part, “Past and Future: The Decline of the System,” is more of an essay and sketch dealing with the most recent decades of Mexican history and
including a strong element of personal interpretation and observation by someone who has been both an observer and participant during these turbulent decades. In the view of that observer (myself), the period is marked by the steady—and wildly punctuated—collapse of the system, but a true history of it cannot yet be written. It does seem clear that the Mexican institution of the imperial presidency is under siege, that the call for democracy is growing stronger and stronger, but no one can say how it will all come out, because history is affected by frameworks and patterns and human intentions but also by luck and chance.

Preface to the Paperback Edition

I am pleased with the reception this book has received, and I welcome this new paperback edition. The dramatic events of 1997 seem to have further confirmed my central thesis: a national history that is a living tension between the weight of the past and the call of the future. Mexico continues to be a duality in constant movement, like the ancient Aztec gods.

I have taken this opportunity to correct typos and rectify some small errors of fact. Only one of these corrections needs special mention. For my description of the student movement of 1968, I had given information that the student leader who revealed—under police pressure—the hiding place of Luis Cabeza de Vaca was Leobardo Lopez Arreche, who would later commit suicide. The information was incorrect. The person responsible was another leader, and I regret the incorrect identification of Lopez Arreche, who before his tragic death produced the film El Grito, an important cinematic record of those events that in so many ways changed the history of Mexico.
"Krauze's **amazingly ambitious study** is really interested in the way Mexico's leaders rebuilt the country by making questionable use of themes from its past. This shrewd and in many ways brave book is **necessary reading.**"


"So what to read for an introduction to what has happened in the last couple of centuries in Mexico? The answer can now be confidently given: Enrique Krauze's original, affecting and often entertaining history of Mexico since 1810. This beautifully written book has been splendidly translated from Spanish by Hank Heifetz."

—Hugh Thomas, *The New Republic*

"**An important contribution** to the literature on Mexico's turbulent and fascinating past. His focus on Mexico's leaders—the "great man" approach to history—seems particularly appropriate here and makes this book, however long, **a fascinating read.**"

—*Business Week*

"Much in the manner of Richard Hofstadter's tour de force *The American Political Tradition*, Enrique Krauze has sought to tell the remarkable history of Mexico through the men who made it."

—Saul Landau, *Los Angeles Times*

"**A book worthy of Mexico's tumultuous history** and vital to our understanding."

—Kenneth Maxwell, *Time*

"Mexico is present within the life of the United States and it will be so more and more through the years to come. By coming to know Mexico, North Americans can learn to understand an unacknowledged part of themselves."

—Octavio Paz

"**A vast interpretive synthesis of two centuries of Mexican political history. Krauze is masterful in bringing his characters to life.**"

—John Bailey, *Washington Post*