

James Wilkie, Mexico studies and current border issues

James Wilkie is a well-known scholar of 20th-century Mexico whose life confirms the saying that “once the dust of Mexico settles on your heart, your soul will have no rest.”¹ After a year at the University of Southern California, Wilkie travelled to Mexico to attend Mexico City College (now the University of the Americas), completing his Bachelor of Arts there in 1958. He has been studying Mexico ever since.

“As a graduate student at Berkeley, I soon found that I was the expert on Mexico’s history, the only one who had been here recently!” He acquired a mission: recording oral history from Mexican leaders, such as Vicente Lombardo Toledano, Ezequiel Padilla and Manuel Gómez Morín. As the project grew, he and his wife Edna developed a methodology for recording life histories. Their study was published in 1968 as *México visto en el siglo XXI* (Mexico Seen in the 21st Century). Three more volumes are ready for publication.

Measuring the Mexican experience through statistics

Wilkie began his doctoral research on statistics to help put the era of President Lázaro Cárdenas (1934-1940) into perspective. He discovered that no one had looked at the Mexican

Revolution in terms of expenditures related to social change.

The systematic study of budget expenditures from 1910 to 1963 (later extended to 1976) was a pioneering example of the use of statistical series for the interpretation of history. In *The Mexican Revolution: Federal Expenditure and Social Change Since 1910*, Wilkie attempted to measure the decrease in poverty and link it with the process of modernization and social change.

He developed a “Social Poverty Index” based on a complex combination of factors (including diet, footwear, and other items). The data show that government funds dedicated to social expenditures are less effective than economic expenditures which achieve social change so that fewer people go barefoot and more people can afford to include wheat in their traditional diet of *tortillas* and beans.

The elaborate study of budget expenditures allowed Wilkie to evaluate each presidential administration’s emphasis on social issues. Contrary to popular beliefs regarding Cárdenas, it was during the presidency of Adolfo López Mateos (1958-1964) that actual social expenditure reached more than 20 per cent of total outlay.

Wilkie found that President Díaz Ordaz (1964-1970) distributed a large amount of land to Mexico’s *campesinos*. Although Díaz Ordaz was

not particularly identified as a “revolutionary president,” he made significant strides toward fulfilling the “statist” goals identified with the Mexican Revolution from 1917 on.

Wilkie’s book was awarded the prestigious Bolton Prize for the Best Book in the Field of Latin American History. The Spanish edition, published by the Fondo de Cultura Económica in 1978, updates the information to 1976.

Sharing the experience of “the real revolution”

Wilkie continues to follow state expenditures in pursuit of his interest in measuring the role of government in the economy. He seeks to test reality —although he adds with a smile that reality “doesn’t exist.”

“Mexico has made tremendous strides in privatization and attracting foreign capital investment in the past three years. President Salinas has brought about the real revolution by turning away from statism, which reached its peak under presidents Echeverría [1970-1976] and López Portillo [1976-1982], who used state power to gain government control of more than half of Mexico’s GDP.

“The PRI,² with a record of ever increasing statism, has taken a new route since 1982 and especially since

¹ Brenner, Anita. *Idols Behind Altars*. New York, Payson and Clark, 1929.

² Partido Revolucionario Institucional (Institutional Revolutionary Party), the ruling party for more than fifty years.

1989. This is revolutionary, if you define revolution as adapting to new conditions. Ironically, institutional revolution continues as it converts to anti-statism.

"The PRI is really 'revolutionary' now as it does away with the traditional power of its own statism. It is a model for many countries as they seek to divest themselves of state-owned enterprises. Countries such as Argentina and Russia as well as those in Eastern Europe can look to Mexico, as a success story in the process of anti-statism."

Mexico has sold more state-owned agencies than any other country in the world. Wilkie initiated contacts he hopes will assist in the application of the Mexican model to Russia. As this example indicates, where many scholars have held that Mexico follows, he argues that Mexico leads.

Wilkie's original concept of developing a non-profit foundation infrastructure for Russia was turned into a Mexican project. He has been working at clearing the jungle of bureaucratic procedures so that "Mexico can interface with the largest non-profit capital market in the world.

"U.S. foundation executives needed to become familiar with the complexity of Mexico, so I took them to Oaxaca. There we met natives who barely spoke Spanish, yet asked for help to break into the international market. They are tired of being exploited and used by middlemen who control everything, from raw materials and transportation to market and price. They want direct sales, which seems simpler than dealing with *caciquismo*³ in Mexico."

The process of creating the new non-profit sector in Mexico involves everything from increasing understanding, so that international non-profit relations can be opened, to

consultations with IRS officials in the U.S. so that attorneys can draft proposals for new legislation.

The result is that the Double Tax Treaty recently sent to the U.S. Congress includes U.S. recognition of Mexican foundations. Once the treaty is passed, business enterprise will be able to fund social change projects in Mexico with resources that will be

tax-deductible in both Mexico and the United States.

A consortium for research on Mexico

The process of applying information generated by students in academic institutions to bringing about change is part of James Wilkie's role as President of PROFMEX —the



James Wilkie participated in the Conference on Political, Economic and Social Problems in California hosted by CISAN.

³ Feudal-derived system of control by a *cacique* (local boss).

Consortium for Research on Mexico. Together with friends long involved with Mexico, among them Clint Smith, formerly of Stanford University, Wilkie created PROFMEX as the U.S. Consortium for Research on Mexico in 1982. PROFMEX soon dropped the "U.S." from its title to accommodate Mexican colleagues who wanted to join.

PROFMEX is a worldwide network for Mexico policy research. It includes about 80 member institutions and more than 500 individual members who collaborate on contemporary issues in U.S.-Mexican relations.

Mexico Policy News, the PROFMEX quarterly newsletter, identifies fifteen specific purposes of the organization, which include: providing a means for individual members and institutions to communicate through electronic mail; sponsoring research; hosting meetings; publishing the PROFMEX Monograph Series and the newsletter. There are currently offices in Arizona, Beijing, Cairo, El Paso, Los Angeles, Moscow, New York, Ottawa, Paris, Toronto and Mexico City.

As a non-profit organization, PROFMEX can receive donations and fund specific projects. The Ford Foundation is currently funding a PROFMEX project entitled "A Case Study of Issues Along the Mexico-U.S. Border." The project is considered a major breakthrough in U.S.-Mexico border studies, since it is the first such effort based on collaboration between scholars from universities on both sides of the border.

The participating universities include the University of Texas at El Paso, the University of California at Los Angeles, San Diego State, the Autonomous University of Ciudad Juárez, the Autonomous University of Baja California, as well as Mexico's Colegio de la Frontera.

Problems emerging from water and industrial waste management are

also being examined, so that solutions can be identified in a timely fashion. Another study funded by the Ford Foundation is looking into housing in the Tijuana-San Diego area.

UNAM's international seminar on California

James Wilkie and his wife Edna were among the participants in the two-day Conference on Political, Economic and Social Problems in California hosted by UNAM's Center for Research on North America (CISAN) in October. The meeting focused on the impact of current economic and social conditions on immigration issues. Experts attended from the University of California at Irvine, Berkeley and Los Angeles as well as San Diego State and the National University of Mexico.

The seminar featured a lively exchange on the underlying motives for funding requests by California Governor Pete Wilson and Senators Barbara Boxer and Dianne Feinstein. Mónica Vereá, Director of CISAN, and Manuel García y Griego, from the University of California at Irvine, collaborated on a study which analyzed research on local and state public assistance costs. They referred as well to recent controversy over "Operation Blockade" and the scapegoating of "illegal immigrants" in California.

The in-depth analysis of estimates regarding costs of social services provided to undocumented workers concluded that no accurate figures are available. Together with Paul Ganster (San Diego State University), Wilkie presented a paper that included updates of specific studies.

Among the border issues identified were environmental conditions, such as hazardous and industrial waste, water, and sewage on the Tijuana-San Diego border. Ganster highlighted the positive effects of the North American Free Trade Agreement on the regulation of such

conditions, stressing that treaty opponents cite unsolved problems in these areas as key indicators of Mexico's track record.

Wilkie mentioned findings from his current study on the tax and Social Security payments made by undocumented workers. Not only does the amount they pay exceed estimated costs, but the use of false identification cards to pay Social Security and taxes has created an interesting dilemma. Payments are being made to accounts which do not exist, or to "legal" individuals whose Social Security accounts are being credited through the use of their numbers on false cards.

Such payments do not benefit the "illegal" workers but are unfairly pooled to benefit legal beneficiaries of U.S. Social Security. The U.S. Federal Government would seem to have a net gain, which should be remitted to areas where it is immediately needed, such as Southern California, where state and local funds do not meet the accumulated social needs of undocumented workers.

Wilkie's opinion is that "illegal immigration problems can be solved by developing employment sources in Mexico so that the country can absorb its own labor force rather than exporting it. Legal immigration to the United States can be adjusted to meet the needs of both the U.S. and Mexico."

He continues: "The border is open, except for people who want to cross legally. Only 50 per cent of those who cross illegally are caught; thus the ones who are returned by the Border Patrol keep trying and eventually get through." Wilkie is known in the academic community as the first to call for an open border, in an article in *Forbes* magazine in 1977. ❧

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