

Reviews

The Mexicans

Patrick Oster

Perennial Library

Harper and Row, New York, 1989.
336 pp.

The current *Reader's Guide* to periodicals lists Mexico more than ten thousand times. Mexico is a popular subject and "Mexico-bashing" is particularly popular, especially among foreign correspondents. Patrick Oster's book *The Mexicans* is no exception.

Those of us who live here and read the English-language press easily recognize what has come to be known as the "mirror curtain" phenomenon. Mexico and its inhabitants are written about within the context of a series of clichés: corruption, poverty, pollution, unemployment, machismo, and the threat of a torrent of poor people flooding across the U.S. border in search of jobs. The practice of looking at a country and its people with U.S.-based criteria blurs the senses when it comes to listening, learning and reporting—that is, what is supposed to be the journalist's role.

There are exceptions to the rule. Anita Brenner, a well-known correspondent for periodicals such as *The Nation* and *The New York Times*, describes the process of looking at Mexico this way: "The need to live, creating with materials; the need to set in spiritual order the physical world; the sense of fitness—these are components of an artist's passion, and these [constitute] Mexican integrity. That is why Mexico cannot be measured by standards other than its own, which are like those of a picture; and why only as artists can Mexicans be intelligible."¹

¹ Anita Brenner, *Idols Behind Altars*. Boston, Beacon Press, 1970, p. 31.

Patrick Oster: correspondent for the *San Jose Mercury*

When the *San Jose Mercury* sent Patrick Oster to cover Mexico, he was not enthusiastic about the assignment. During his four-year stay, he and his wife adopted a Mexican baby. Reading his book, I was torn between anger and sympathy for the author. Although his description of Mexico is generally negative, he occasionally forgets this slant and capitulates, indicating an understanding and sympathy for the Mexican people.

The book's introduction is laden with veiled threats, misleading information, incomplete facts and extensive bad news. In contrast, I was struck by the sympathetic and constructive remarks that Oster makes in his "Conclusion." Unfortunately the negative comes first.

Patrick Oster did his homework. He read the right Mexican authors, such as Octavio Paz, Carlos Fuentes, Carlos Monsiváis and Juan Rulfo. All are well-known and highly respected intellectuals. His preparation shows when he writes about Mexican politics. This material is professional, unbiased and well written.

Changes in the world scenario have made some of Oster's data obsolete, I would even say bizarre. The issue of the Soviets using Mexico as a gateway to spy on the U.S. clearly is no longer relevant, if it ever was! The update written for the pocket-book edition is well done, indicating the author's continuing interest.

While Oster cautions his readers about the difficulty of obtaining precise figures in or about Mexico, throughout his text he uses figures supplied by Mexican, U.S. and international organizations. The sources are indicated at the back of the book; no

footnotes are provided. The Notes to the text are incidental and annoying.

Who are the Mexicans and what are they about?

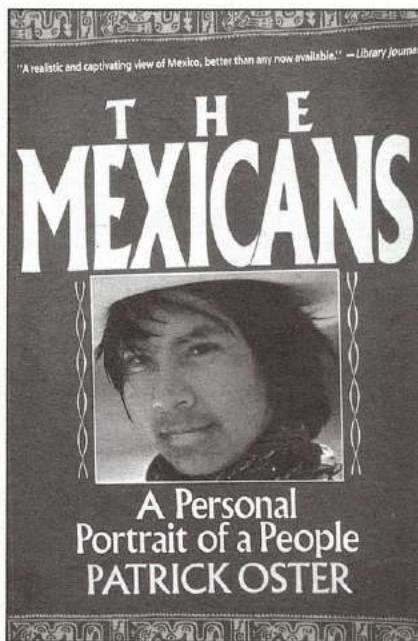
The Mexicans portrays the people of Mexico in twenty chapters, each a vignette of a different person. The book is divided into three parts: "Conditions," "Politics" and "Values."

The first section, "Conditions," includes Oster's servant, a "junior" (the Mexican equivalent of "yuppie"), a streetcorner fire-eater, an undocumented worker, a doctor and a member of a punk gang. All, except the undocumented worker, live in Mexico City, a true megalopolis.

"Politics" describes individuals from the ruling party (the PRI—Institutional Revolutionary Party), the conservative opposition (PAN—National Action Party), a smuggler, a garbage sorter, a peasant, a policeman, a journalist and an evangelist. Again, four of these eight people live in Mexico City.

The people in the third section, "Values," include a comedian, a gay man, a spiritualist, a blond woman, a feminist and an expatriate. Four of the six live in Mexico City.

In general, the people in each chapter are credible; they exist. However, once Oster describes their circumstances, he begins to ramble and repeat his negative positions about Mexico. The text could have used a good blue pencil to edit out the repetitions. For example, the hardships imposed on people who live in cities with more than 15 million people could be omitted; they are not unique to Mexico City. Tokyo, New York and other metropolises suffer as well. Fourteen of the twenty vignettes are about people who live in Mexico City,



whose estimated population currently stands at more than twenty million.

The Mexicans written up in the "Values" section share universal values. Mexican gay men aren't very different from their American or French brothers in finding it difficult to tell their families about their sexual preferences, or "come out," as it is often called in the U.S.

Oster is successful in documenting similarities among the peoples of the world. Mexicans are indeed not different from their brothers and sisters in other countries who are gay, who read your aura, who fight for women's rights or prefer to live exiled in other countries after a bad business experience. Even the "incredulous critical author" admits that he was spooked by his visit to the spiritualist.

What he doesn't include

Mexicans are a polite people. The imprint of having been conquered and living under Spanish domination for four hundred years remains. When a "foreigner" or "white man" says something, the guideline is: "Agree with him; he is our guest!" Oster is aware of Mexico's history—he knows about it "intellectually."

What he seems to have overlooked is that the very fact that "an American journalist" was asking the questions would have an effect on the answers. The maid, the fire-eater, the evangelist all know who they are talking to. They might get a raise or some extra help if only they make the man believe their sad stories.

The same critique can be made of Oscar Lewis' work, which Oster quotes in some of his vignettes. At times the description of an individual soars into the realm of unreality. The undocumented worker is a wonderful example. Oster says: "Make no mistake. Miguel did want to go home. He had come to like the life he found in Dallas. The salaries were enough to buy nutritious food. The police were honest, not always demanding bribes like the cops in Mexico. Health services were good. And he felt he got something for the U.S. and Texas taxes he paid. He didn't even mind paying Social Security, though he knew, as a Mexican, he'd never get a dime in benefits. He had encountered real democracy" (p. 64).

First, undocumented workers are often hired for less than the minimum wage. Is that enough for "nutritious food" in Dallas? And second, where does Oster hide when Mexican-Americans, blacks and other minorities are abused by police?

The Mexican government is a favorite target for the "Mexico-bashers." What they forget is that while the government is not perfect, Mexico has been governed by the same party for 60 years—a party that for better or for worse has avoided coups, army takeovers and widespread guerrilla activity.

Mexicans know they live next door to the most powerful nation in the world; this isn't just ancient history. Mexico has its share of expatriate U.S. citizens. Some are retired people; some fled to Mexico to escape McCarthyism and wound up staying. The country absorbs

refugees, like an accordion, stretching with Argentines and shrinking to welcome Chileans. Years ago the refugees came from the Spanish Civil War, World War II and social unrest in Lebanon.

Oster says more about his blind spots than about Mexicans. He bypasses art, music, food, color—and warmth. Where are the organ grinders, the weavers, the potters, the muralists, the cartoonists? Mexico has wonderful women intellectuals—why does Oster interview a soap-opera actress and not a poet?

The city of more than twenty million people has a sense of humor; it laughs at itself. Political cartoonists take digs at the tax system: "the fee for breathing lead is...!" The Group of 100 intellectuals is mentioned, *en passant*, but not chosen for a full chapter. The Mexican picnic at every corner; the vendors hustling everything from tissues to toys; the jugglers, pantomime artists and vendors at most stop lights also transmit a Mexican flavor. Radio programs cover the sounds of Mexico's streets. Exhibition halls are full of Mexican art and the markets are full of people buying beautiful folk art.

Patrick Oster and I know different Mexicans. I know the ones who run public health campaigns, teach physics at MIT, paint, dance, sing, participate with colleagues in international study groups. The old Mexican saying, "Poor Mexico, so far from God and so close to the United States," should be complemented with the recent notion that the Mexican border will soon be a chaotic gridlock of Mexicans going across for "fast bucks" and U.S. citizens fleeing from consumerism, seeking the excitement of the Latin way of life. ❧

Susannah Glusker

Doctoral candidate at the Union
Institute studying the relationship among
U.S. and Mexican intellectuals.