

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA – GREENSBORO

FALL 2011, HIS 320

History of Mexico and Central America

Prof. Peter B. Villella

Lecture: Tues. and Thurs. 2-3:15pm, in MHRA 2207

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Welcome! This class will explore the unique and fascinating histories of the modern nations of Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica from their original native civilizations, to their conquest and rule by the Spanish Empire, to the independent republics of today. We will examine the region's culture, society, and politics, with emphases on the significance of its indigenous heritage, the legacy of colonialism and widespread race-mixing, the influence of the United States and other foreign financial and military powers, and the challenges and pitfalls of modernity.

The history of Mexico and Central America is important to us today because our hemisphere is demographically, economically, and culturally integrated like never before. The United States is one of the world's largest Spanish-speaking nations, and Americans of Latin American background – the majority of whose families come from Mexico and Central America – are its largest ethnic minority. North America from Alaska to the Panama Canal is in many ways a giant free trade zone, with huge consequences for workers and consumers in each of its nations. And while business is transnational, so are families and even individuals. Predominately Hispanophone cities such as Miami and Los Angeles are firmly within the Latin American cultural sphere, consuming the same media and participating in the same conversations. Thus, students who complete this course will be in a better position to understand and navigate the transnational politics, culture, and economy of the present and future.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Students who complete this course will be able to:

1. *Identify* the major issues and events of Mexican and Central American history;
2. *Perceive* the social and cultural patterns behind those issues and events;
3. *Explain* the origins of those social and cultural patterns; and
4. *Understand* the constant interplay between continuity and change over time in history.

TEXTS

This course requires heavy – but interesting! – reading. We will not be using a textbook; instead, we will explore a number of primary sources, fiction and nonfiction, written by and about the people we are studying at different moments in their history. There are four required texts available at the UNCG bookstore; the rest I will post in pdf format to the course website.

- 1) Stuart B. Schwartz, ed., *Victors and Vanquished: Spanish and Nahua Views of the Conquest of Mexico* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000): a collection of accounts of the conquest of Mexico by Spanish conquistadors and their indigenous allies.
- 2) José Joaquín Fernández de Lizardi, *The Mangy Parrot (Abridged)*, translated by David Frye (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 2005): a novel about the complex peoples and cultures of colonial Mexico City.
- 3) Mariano Azuela, *The Underdogs*, translated by Gustavo Pellón (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 2006): a novel about the Mexican Revolution of 1910.
- 4) Octavio Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude and Other Writings*, translated by Lysander Kemp (New York: Grove Press, 1985): critical observations on Mexican national culture and identity by a 20th-century Mexican thinker and diplomat.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS AND ASSESSMENT

As an upper division course designed primarily for history majors, the graded component will consist mostly of reading comprehension and writing. Grades will be given for: 1) attendance; 2) a geographical quiz on Mexico and Central America; 3) a number of short responses to reading assignments, posted to an online journal; 4) two essays (~5-6 pages each) in response to the novels; and 5) a final exam, testing both lecture material and comprehension of class readings.

Essays and other written work are given letter grades which are then translated as follows: A+ (rare) = 100pts; A=95; A-=92; B+=88; B=85; B-=82; C+=78, etc.

I will not accept assigned work after the deadline; it will receive a zero.

<i>Attendance</i>	10%
<i>Map Quiz</i>	10%
<i>Online Journal</i>	10%
<i>Essay 1</i>	20%
<i>Essay 2</i>	20%
<i>Final Exam</i>	30%

ATTENDANCE AND PARTICIPATION

Attendance at all class meetings is **mandatory**. Understanding that illnesses and life events sometimes get in the way, rather than distinguish between “excused” and “unexcused” absences, all students will start with a “perfect” attendance score (that is, 100 points) and are allowed three absences for free. After that, I will subtract 20 points per missed class. I reserve the right to drop any student with more than 6 absences. In addition, since lateness is disruptive, I will also penalize excessive or habitual tardiness 5-10pts.

Students are expected to be attentive at all times and to participate in discussions and group activities. **Disruptive individuals may be asked to leave**, counting as an unexcused absence. This includes (but is not limited to): talking loudly, texting, surfing websites unrelated to class, and sleeping. My main concern is not “forcing” you to learn, but how disruptive students affect others. If you cannot or do not wish to abide these rules, please consider dropping the course.

Assigned readings are to be completed **before the class in which the material is discussed**. You cannot discuss the readings if you have not read them. I will deduct 5-10 points from students who are regularly unprepared to participate in discussions and group activities.

ONLINE JOURNAL

Most weeks I will post a “thought question” to the course website prompting students to reflect upon and integrate the lectures and readings. Over the course of the semester, students will respond to **at least five** questions in the designated place online. Responses should be no more than a paragraph in length. I will grade the students’ journals at the end of the semester (a letter grade).

STANDARDS AND POLICIES FOR WRITTEN WORK

As historians, your ability to write in clear and articulate prose is very important. I expect the essays to meet basic university writing standards, especially regarding spelling and grammar. Proofread and spell-check everything, as clarity and quality will affect your grade.

Take special care not to plagiarize. Plagiarism – that is, when you quote or paraphrase somebody else’s words or ideas without crediting him or her – is the academic equivalent of lying, cheating, or stealing. **Every word you write in this class must be your own, not copied from any other source, whether in print or online**, unless clearly indicated. If in doubt, ask! The UNCG Academic Integrity Policy is online at <http://academicintegrity.uncg.edu>. I reserve the right to fail any student who has plagiarized on an assignment.

Essays are to be typed in Microsoft Word (or its equivalent), in 12-pt New Times Roman font, with all the standard 1-inch margins. (Do not mess with the margins.)

CLASS WEBSITE AND EMAIL

You must have a working email address, and check it regularly, as it is the main means of communication out of class. I will send out reminders, assignments, and other announcements regularly.

The website on Blackboard will also play a major role. I will post the mandatory readings, topics for short assignments, study questions, links, and other materials necessary to perform well. The online journals are set up on the Blackboard platform. Occasionally, I will also use the website to follow up on themes covered in lectures and discussions, and respond to student questions. **You should check the website regularly for updates.**

CLASSROOM ETIQUETTE

In this course we will often discuss sensitive and emotionally charged topics, such as race, class, gender, imperialism, exploitation, and immigration. We will also see and read primary materials representing archaic and (frankly) offensive perspectives. As they are part of our history (whether we like it or not), we will not censor or ignore them, and students should be prepared to address them directly and in a mature, academic fashion.

In discussions, we will not always agree with one another, yet we welcome diverse interpretations, as a discussion where everyone agrees is more of a pep rally than a classroom, unlikely to be enlightening. We aim, therefore, to foster an atmosphere in which all students feel free to express their ideas, and in which we can disagree and challenge one another openly without feeling threatened or disrespected. Thus, **personal attacks and offensive language will not be tolerated**, since they obstruct honest debate.

A good rule to keep in mind: **when challenging another's arguments, try to do so in a way that assumes good faith on his or her part.** Address the strongest aspects of his or her ideas, not a cartoonish, simplistic, and easily dismissed version of them. This rule has the added benefit of requiring each of us to think harder and question our own assumptions.

Finally, **TURN OFF ALL CELL PHONES.** No texting. Students who disrupt class or who are otherwise not contributing positively may be asked to leave, counting as a missed class. You may have drinks – but not food – in class.

Have a great semester!