

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA – GREENSBORO

HIS 320

History of Mexico and Central America

Prof. Peter B. Villella

Instructor's Office: 2121 MHRA

Instructor's Email: villella@uncg.edu

Welcome! This class explores the unique and fascinating histories of the people of Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Panama from the beginning of human settlement, to their conquest and rule by colonizers from Spain, to the independent republics of the nineteenth century, to the complex modern societies of today. We will examine the region's politics, social and economic structures, and cultures, emphasizing its indigenous heritages, the legacy of colonialism and race-mixing, the influence of the United States and other foreign powers, and the challenges of modernity.

The history of Mexico and Central America is important to us today because ignorance and misunderstandings about them are widespread in the US, even as our hemisphere is demographically, economically, and culturally integrated like never before. Over 30% of the US population lives in areas that were once part of Mexico and shares much of its cultural heritage, often unwittingly. Americans of Latin American background, most of whose families came from Mexico and Central America, constitute our largest ethnic minority. North America from Alaska to the Panama Canal is in many ways a giant free trade zone, with profound consequences for workers and consumers on both sides of the Rio Grande. And just as commerce transcends political boundaries, so do ideas, languages, cultures, and even individuals and families. Entire communities from Los Angeles to Houston to Charlotte lay partially within the Mexican and Central American cultural sphere, as many who live there consume the same media and participate in the same conversations, while US Catholicism today derives much from the aesthetics and emphases of the Mexican Church. Students who complete this course will be in a better position to understand and navigate the transnational politics, culture, and economy of our present and future.

STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES:

As a GN marker course, HIS-320 addresses the following College-level SLOs defined by UNCG's General Education Program (see <http://undergraduate.uncg.edu/colleagues/gened.php>):

1. Find, interpret, and evaluate information on diverse cultures. **(LG1, LG3)**
2. Describe interconnections among regions of the world, focusing on cultures, nations or sub-nationalities in the Caribbean, Latin America, Middle East/North Africa, Asia, Africa, Pacific Islands, or indigenous peoples around the world). **(LG1, LG3)**
3. Use diverse cultural frames of reference and perspectives to analyze issues. **(LG3, LG5)**

COURSE RESPONSIBILITIES AND GRADES:

As an advanced 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) participation in class discussions; 3) a geographical quiz on Mexico and Central America; 4) a number of short responses to reading assignments, posted to an online journal; 5) two essays (~5 pages each) analyzing and interpreting the sources; and 6) short responses to five assigned films. All written work is assigned letter grades according to the rubric below.

Attendance	10%
Participation	10%
Map Quiz	5%
Thought questions	25%
Two essays	40%
Film responses	10%

A = fulfills assignment entirely while amply demonstrating **original insight and reflection**
B = fulfills assignment entirely and thoughtfully
C = mostly fulfills assignment, but without originality (e.g., merely echoes the instructor)
D = partially incomplete, or betrays non-comprehension of theme or issue
F = severely incomplete, irrelevant, plagiarized, or never turned in

TEXTS AND FILMS

This course requires heavy—but interesting!—reading. There is a textbook as well as a number of primary sources written by and about the people we will be studying. **All readings are mandatory.** Most of the primary sources are online, in pdf format. Students must also purchase the following two items at the UNCG bookstore:

- William Beezley, *Mexico in World History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).
- Stuart B. Schwartz, ed., *Victors and Vanquished: Spanish and Nahua Views of the Conquest of Mexico* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000).

You must also watch at least five films over the course of the semester. The film options are listed on the course schedule and linked from the course website; all of them are either available online or on DVD format under reserve at the UNCG library. *NOTE: if you speak Spanish, there are many other films without subtitles that you may choose from; please see me if you would like to explore these other options.*

ATTENDANCE AND PARTICIPATION

Attendance at all class meetings is **mandatory, and I do not distinguish between “excused” and “unexcused” absences.** Understanding that life happens, all students start with a “perfect” attendance score (that is, 100 points, or A+) and are allowed three absences without penalty. After that, I will subtract 15 points per missed class. I may drop any student with more than 6

unexplained absences. Since lateness is disruptive, I will also penalize excessive or habitual tardiness 5-10pts. **I reserve the right to drop any student with more than six absences.** In Since lateness is disruptive, I also penalize excessive or habitual tardiness.

This class will feature an important discussion component, built from our interaction with the films and other primary sources. **You must come to each class prepared to discuss the readings, and to both ask and answer questions derived from them.** Every week each student will receive a participation grade of either S(atisfactory) or U(nsatisfactory). The final participation grade (10 points possible) will be determined by the formula $G=(S+1/14)*0.1$, where S is the number of weeks with a grade of S (the +1 is to allow for a missed class or a “bad” week).

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. **All formal written coursework** is to be typed in Microsoft Word (or its equivalent), in 12-pt New Times Roman font, with all the standard 1-inch margins. Papers must be submitted via Turnitin through the course website on Canvas. **I do not accept late papers.**

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 will fail any student who has plagiarized, and report him or her to the dean.

CLASS WEBSITE AND EMAIL

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

The course website on Canvas will also play a major role. There you will find the texts, topics for short assignments, study questions, links, and other materials necessary to perform well. 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 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 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, straw-man version of them. This rule has the added benefit of requiring each of us to think harder about and question our own assumptions, thus further refining our own arguments.

Have a great semester!