

Mexico's Managed Decay

A continuous environmental disaster

Book Review by Wade Graham

Joel Simon, an American journalist who lives in Mexico City, has produced an excellent, wide-ranging, movingly-reported book about Mexican environmental history and the environmental costs of the country's economic policies — costs increasingly felt not only in Mexico but in the United States. Simon's thesis — developed in chapters covering the oil industry, logging, rural agriculture, coral reefs, pollution, and a tour-de-force history of Mexico City through its (lack of) control of its water resources — is that the fate of the land is ineluctably linked to the political and economic dispensation of the society that subsists on it.

In Mexico's case, this dispensation was established in the first moments of the Spanish Conquest and has yet to be meaningfully altered. Beginning with a short, lucid sketch of the collision between the Aztec and Spanish empires, Simon argues that the legacy of the conquest was not conquest at all in the sense of absorption or even combination into a new, coherent society but spotty superimposition of Spanish norms over Indian ones: an ethic of private landholding over communal, of one racial community over another, of an urban cultural realm over a rural one. Far from becoming resolved over time, these tensions have fueled a state of permanent conflict between the dominant, landholding minority (about two percent of the population) and the rural, landless majority — inheritors of the original "castes" of the sixteenth century.

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This conflict is in turn driven by a structural instability of land tenure — on the one hand the tradition of unfettered encroachment by large estates onto village lands, on the other the state's theoretical power to redistribute land "in the interest of the nation," a power actually enshrined in the Mexican constitution — instability which encourages unsustainable extraction over stewardship. Mexican history — Mexican time — has been occupied by the serial rape of Mexican space, with little accumulation of wealth, even at the thin apex of the economic pyramid, to show for it. Simon notes that an integral part of this legacy is, charitably, a lack of accountability in civic institutions: a fact widely aired during the Nafta debate and one which would seem to dim any hopes of rapid progress on environmental issues in Mexico.

Perhaps the greatest contribution of *Endangered Mexico* to American readers is its attempt to explain how the Mexicans we encounter in our cities and fields came to be there largely as a result of government farm policies, both Mexican and American, which have sought to turn the Mexican peasant "...from subsistence farmer to part-time wage laborer, to agricultural, full-time worker ... a process that has been going on for most of this century and is expected to accelerate. In fact, with a few brief interludes, the Mexican policy toward the *campesino* has been remarkably consistent for the past quarter century. The strategy has been to get rid of them — but slowly, in order to minimize the social disruption." Since the 1940s the Mexican government has pursued the "proletarianization" of its peasantry in order to further its dream of rapid industrialization and development through "export-led growth." This was accomplished through encouraging dependence on fertilizers and pesticides, squeezing credit, and manipulating corn subsidies until the "cycle of debt" drives *campesinos* off the land and into cities — often U.S. cities — refugees from a sort of taxpayer-sponsored Dust Bowl of the Mexican

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Environment
on the Edge**

by Joel Simon

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heartland.

That this model of development has failed, and failed radically, is one of Simon's strongest, and most basic points. But, the strategy has developed a dynamic of its own, a momentum of human need which poses a very stiff challenge to environmentalism. "For many first world environmentalists," Simon writes, "it demands for basic resources made by the poor that are putting the strain on Mexico's — and the world's — environment ...cutting down the forests to plant its corn, crowding the cities, and contributing to its own misery by having too many children." Indeed, Mexico's population has exploded from 15 million after the 1910 revolution to at least 90 million now, and the burgeoning poor are manifestly a burden on resources. In the book's most powerful and distressing section, Simon recounts his journeys to the Lacandon jungle in Chiapas State to visit with Subcommander Marcos, leader of the Zapatista rebellion. What he discovers is that the Indians who are the soldiers and constituents of the Zapatistas — themselves immigrants to the jungle, having been pushed off their traditional lands elsewhere — are demanding first and foremost access to jungle reserves, believing that their only chance for survival is in clearing what remains of the jungle for farms and ranches.

Those in the developing world fix the blame on the developed world's manifestly rapacious patterns of consumption. Simon, for his part, points out that Mexico has both exported its problems and imported them: the poor, and their reproduction, are to some extent *made* — constructed by a system for which American policy, economic theory, and consumer demand are heavily responsible, and from which Americans profit: "...the managed decay of the Mexican rural environment feeds the labor pool," he writes, and helps "to put cheap food" on American tables.

At one level, the conflict headlined as "environment or jobs," may be irreducible as long as we remain shouting across an "economic

chasm." One scene in the book says it all: Simon speaks with a woman in a Tijuana neighborhood polluted by maquiladoras who has lost a baby to anencephaly, "a rare and fatal birth defect in which the baby is born with an open skull and undeveloped brain."

By pooling the pay of several children who worked in the factories, she was able to acquire a refrigerator, a stove, and a television. Perhaps that is why talking about the pollution made her more depressed than angry.

To her and tens of millions of others, it seems to be an unfortunate but acceptable trade. But it does not therefore have to be acceptable to Americans. And the economic gap may not be bridgeable, Simon warns: "Uniform, global progress is not the world's destiny. ...The challenge for the next century will be to find ways for fishermen and petrochemical plants to share the same river." It is a challenge which will not be met unless hard positions for preservation and the enforcement of environmental laws — including U.S. laws — are taken, to force people and markets to change the way chemicals are made and fish are caught and sold. Environmentalists should not strive first to be peace-makers or arbitrators, but advocates, at least until they succeed in putting themselves out of business.

There are a few quibbles with what is otherwise a fine book, one which admittedly makes no claims to comprehensiveness. The packaging panders too much — *An Environment on the Edge* of what? Simon details at length the continuous environmental disaster that has been Mexican history, so where can it go from here? What exactly is endangered we are not told. The book's lack of specificity and basic quantification is bothersome and weakens Simon's case: there are few numbers beyond the most abstract of statistics, and no maps. Even the cover photo, by Sebastiao Salgado, is mysterious, given no time or place — one wonders if it was taken in Mexico.

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