



Mexico, Interrupted: Labor, Idleness, and the Economic Imaginary of Independence

Sergio Gutiérrez Negrón. Vanderbilt University Press, 2023. 258 pp., \$34.95, paperback.

P. Andrade

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BOOK REVIEW

Sergio Gutiérrez Negrón. *Mexico, Interrupted: Labor, Idleness, and the Economic Imaginary of Independence.* Vanderbilt University Press, 2023. 258 pp., \$34.95, paperback.

The colono, the artisan, and the vagrant are the figures that give symbolic resolution to the real-and-imagined prospects of capitalist modernization in Sergio Gutiérrez Negrón's *Mexico, Interrupted*, a book that explores the economic imaginaries of post-independence Mexico. The centrality enjoyed by these three "anthropological figurations of labor" in political and public discourse (5), the book demonstrates, helped guide projects of national security and economic development between 1821 and 1852 and, simultaneously, articulated the anxieties and ambitions of Mexico's lettered elites as they pursued their wishful dreams of national prosperity and territorial expansion. Focusing on "the surprising stability and continuity that characterized narratives of economic growth and development" (16), *Mexico, Interrupted* offers a rejoinder to conventional accounts of the Mexican nineteenth century as a contest between liberal and conservative projects. Instead, the book demonstrates how competing solutions to Mexico's political-economic stagnation were shaped and, in turn, helped shape determinate notions of wage-labor, productivity, private property, and individual freedom. Whereas the means to overcome the perceived imbalance between the nation's abundant natural resources and its demographic scarcity necessarily varied from administration to administration, the colono, the artisan, and the vagrant recurred throughout the period as ideological vehicles that allowed Mexico's lettered elites to leverage the power of the state in their attempt to secure the nation's and, in passing, their own economic future.

The economic imaginaries traced by the book were deeply impacted by two events: "the traumatic loss of Texas in 1836" and the United States' invasion of Mexico in 1846 (55), both of which sedimented narratives of interruption and uncertainty with regards to Mexico's capitalist development. Throughout the book, Gutiérrez Negrón maps the political reactions to these events through a series of initiatives, legislative proposals, policy documents, and editorials that provide a sensible collection of evidence regarding the legal and institutional efforts that helped guide the process of the formal subsumption of labor under capital. Agrarian contracts, anti-vagrancy laws, the partitioning of empty lands, projects of expropriation and land reform, all of which, in one way or another, involved a particular understanding of the relationship between the state and private enterprise, i.e. which of the two was the most viable and efficient candidate to implement economic policy, carry out settlement programs, and develop industrial infrastructure. Gutiérrez Negrón surveys the narrow accomplishments and concealed limitations of many of these projects—for instance, their persistent disregard for Mexico's indigenous populations—and artfully examines their turbulent litigation in the court of public opinion.

While the book chooses to focus on the colono, the artisan, and the vagrant as either positive (the colono) or negative ("the artisan was always a vagrant-in-waiting" (82)) figurations of labor, one of the most powerful avenues for critical inquiry opened by *Mexico, Interrupted* is the corresponding and intertwined development of social spaces that, throughout the same period, provided the spatial situations necessary to steady Mexico's transition to capitalism: the *colonia*, the factory (as in the case of La Constancia Mexicana, surveyed in chapter 2), and the city. Thus, the intellectual history that *Mexico, Interrupted* reconstructs 'from above,' with its emphases on morality, punishment, self-interest, and the ruling classes' contempt for idleness and leisure, will lend itself as a productive counterpoint to all future scholarship invested in the social dimension of these spaces. Finally, it is worth pointing out that a fourth, shadow figure recurs throughout the book, one that is perhaps discursively less relevant for the period in question but ultimately connects many of the problems explored by the book to our present moment: that of the immigrant, whose role in the republic of labor imagined by Mexico's Creole elites was simultaneously

ambiguous and dynamic. The emphases of the book's third chapter on the surveillance of labor, including anti-vagrancy raids, moral panics, and new legislation that, among other things, generated "lists of citizens that could be cross-referenced with the lists of employment reported by businesses" or "mandated that [...] artisans had to be able to produce documents which proved their good behavior [...] while servants [...] had to carry, at all times, a document that listed their duties, salary, and current and previous employers" (155), similarly reveal a striking resemblance with the ongoing criminalization and persecution of undocumented immigrant-workers around the world.

A provocative challenge to the prevailing focus on the contemporary in Mexican literary and cultural studies, *Mexico, Interrupted* upholds the necessity to think the present historically and to think presently about labor conditions.

ORCID

P. Andrade  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1962-2515>

Pavel Andrade 

Texas Tech University

 Pavel.Andrade@ttu.edu

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