

Mexico: When the Center Will Not Hold

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Review of Jo Tuckman. *Mexico: Democracy Interrupted*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012). 311 pages. Photos. Bibliographic Essay. Index. \$35.00 hardback, \$19.25 Kindle.

If you want an overview of Mexico today—either because you’re planning a trip and have never been there, or because you haven’t kept up on Mexico for the last few years, or because you follow Mexico pretty regularly but would like to see an overview of the general situation—you couldn’t do better than Jo Tuckman’s *Mexico: Democracy Interrupted*. Tuckman, a journalist who works for the London *Guardian* and has written for a number of other publications as well, brings to this book not only her nose for news but also an intellectual depth not always found in such work, which may be why this book is published by Yale and not a commercial publishing house. In nearly every chapter she brings into her account a Mexican historian, sociologist or political scientist whose book she has read or whom she interviews for this project.

This is a good read held together by one strong idea. The central thesis of the book is that the end of the seventy-year rule of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) with the election in 2000 of President Vicente Fox of the conservative National Action Party led to a fundamental change in Mexico, and not just a change in its political system either. The end of the PRI era, the break-up of the one-party state, and the weakening of the gravitational pull of the center led to the rise in politics and society of what she calls the “de facto powers.” Tuckman uses this analysis of the debilitated central power and the strengthening de facto powers to explain the changes in Mexican politics, in the drug cartels, and in the Catholic Church. Her argument is both convincing and illuminating, providing us with a useful perspective from which to examine contemporary Mexico.

Around that strong intellectual armature, Tuckman winds the sometimes bizarre, often frightening, and frequently moving stories of Mexico today, taking up politics, the legal system, religion, the drug wars, and environmental issues. While Tuckman herself does not make a strong political argument, her book is informed by a liberal sensibility. Over the years I have read many such journalistic accounts of Mexico in both English and Spanish. The classic and still the best—though now quite dated—remains *New York Times* reporter Alan Riding’s *Distant Neighbors: A Portrait of the Mexicans* published in 1985, a monumental 560-page account that combined journalistic savvy with a deep understanding of Mexican history and culture. Tuckman’s book does not pretend to be the same sort of encyclopedic account, but within the parameters she chose, she has done a fine job. If you want to know what Mexico is like today, read this book.