HISTORY 461: The Mexican Revolution: Birth, Life, Death

Steve Volk
Class: Wednesdays, 7:00-9:00 PM (Rice 339)
Office: 309 Rice
Office Hours: Tues, 11:00-Noon; Wed, 2:00-3:00 PM; Thurs, 1:30-2:30 PM, and by appt.
Phone: x58522
email: svolk@oberlin.edu

The Mexican Revolution has long been considered one of the "iconic" revolutions of the 20th century although distinct from the three revolutions that were still to come, in Russia, China and Cuba. Like the other three, it gave rise to a stable state which was long-enduring, and highly controlled via a single party. The Mexican Revolution, like the others, restructured the prominence of previous economic elites, and shuffled the economic fortunes of different groups (although largely leaving subaltern sectors at the bottom). The Revolution also promoted and managed an impressive cultural effervescence, much of it designed to re-imagine national identity. Unlike the other three revolutions, the Mexican was not exclusively or even primarily socialist in orientation or Marxist in inspiration, although leftist ideologies were well represented.

From its inception, the Revolution negotiated and disputed the question of what it meant to be Mexican, often called mexicanidad or "Mexican-ness." In the post-1920 period, after the fighting was largely over, a new sense of being Mexican emerged, embedded in a set of different (and conflicting) narratives and representations that arose out of the conflicts of the Revolution itself. From the start, historians have debated what the Revolution was about (a debate which makes up the historiography of the Mexican Revolution). While there are numerous ways to enter that historiography, in this course we'll do it by examining how Mexican identity came to be re-invented or re-imagined in the post-revolutionary period. Above all, we'll explore how different sectors enter into these identities: native people, mestizos, women, campesinos, etc. When we examine accounts of the Revolution from a variety of sources (historical, novelistic, artistic), we'll be exploring how these sectors were re-imagined in the new context. Narratives of the Revolution began to emerge during its most tumultuous phase, in the violent birth that convulsed the country for the decade between 1910 and 1920. To speak of the life of the Revolution, on the other hand, is to recognize that, following the bloodshed, a single, dominant force consolidated its control and institutionalized its rule for the rest of the century. It also attempted to construct a hegemonic narrative about the Revolution that could be deployed locally, nationally, and internationally through state-supported apparatuses (culture, public art, education, tourism, cinema, political discourse, the selection and veneration of party leaders, the selection of heroes and villains, etc.). We
shouldn't forget, though, that, hegemony always contains within it oppositions and resistance, and their voices will be increasingly heard as the conservative dominance grinds on. As the narrative of a glorious revolutionary becomes more and more discordant with lived history, with actual events on the ground, the Mexican Revolution began to splinter and then, disintegrate. The final part of the course will look at the collapse of this the dominant narrative about the Revolution, and perhaps its death. For all its enduring strength, the institutionalized Revolution was hard pressed to survive the combined tsunamis of the 1968 student massacre, the government's non-response to the 1985 earthquake in Mexico City, the implementation of NAFTA and the Zapatista uprising of 1994, and, ultimately, the defeat of the state party (PRI) in 2000. And what of the Revolution? That remains to be seen.

Course Goals/Learning Objectives
Course goals and learning objectives are there to share with you a sense of my intentions, what I am intending that you gain in the course, why the assignments are designed as they are (or, in this case, will be), and how your work will be evaluated. I have developed learning objectives in terms of content areas as well as skills and learning dispositions (the particular ways of learning and reflection that will be stressed in the course). By the end of the course, you should be more conversant with:

- 20th century Mexican history, including its general chronology and political geography;
- A basic historiography of the Mexican revolution;
- Some important debates in how we understand the revolution.

You should also have gained:

- A clearer sense of how narrative works in the study of history;
- An understanding of the relationship of national identity to the formation of historical narrative;
- A greater ability to read different texts, from the secondary literature (monographs and journal articles) to art and literature;
- An appreciation of how to different texts in historical analysis;
- A better ability to analyze strengths and weaknesses in historical argumentation;

In terms of skills and learning dispositions, you will work to become:

- Better writers and speakers, able to use evidence to support argument, can capable of analytic sophistication and synthesis;
- Better able to reason and discuss in class and to carefully assess the arguments of your peers and the instructor;
- More skilled at a "close" and careful reading: of texts and images, in particular;
- Able to examine and challenge your own positions;
- Better able to work collaboratively with your colleagues.

Assignments, Grading, Feedback:

As an upper-level seminar, I like to leave part of the syllabus design to the students.
This includes, in particular, the some learning outcomes (I have already listed my own), and the course assignments: the type of assignments, how many, when they will be due, how they will be evaluated, and how final grading will be determined. I would like you to talk with others outside of class and, at the start of the second week, come prepared for a discussion of all of these elements. We will come decide on all these points in the second week or, if necessary, the third. Once that is settled, I will post a final syllabus on line. In the meantime, here’s what you need to know in order to think about selecting assignments for the course:

1. Assignments need to be aligned with learning objects, they are not just about "spitting back" content. They should be designed so that I (and you) can see if you are reaching the course’s learning objectives.

2. Assignments are a way for you to get feedback on your progress, both from me; from your peers, and for you to evaluate your own learning.

3. There are always trade-offs to consider when designing assignments. Do you prefer shorter, weekly papers, as a means of helping you work more productively week by week, or do you prefer a longer project at the end of class? Will that provide you with the on-going feedback you need? Do you want the opportunity to present your findings to the class as a whole? Are you more interested in an extended review and critique of the readings or do you want to use the readings to spur your research into other areas?

4. You will get a grade at the end of the class, so you need to think of whether you want grading to be distributed relatively equally throughout the class (i.e., with each assignment getting approximately the same weighting) or a larger project that counts for more?

5. Finally, I put this course in this semester specifically in order to coordinate with the exhibition of Latin America and Latino art at the Allen Memorial Art Museum, so some component of the course, and the assignments, needs to attend to visual materials and visual analysis.

Regardless of what assignments you determine, there are some general rules:

Late papers turned in without prior permission — you must request an extension before the due date of the paper — will be reduced by one grade-step for each day that an assignment is late. (In other words, papers due on a Wednesday at class time which are turned in Thursday will be reduced by one grade-step; Friday by two, etc.)

You may request an Incomplete in the class ONLY to complete the final paper/project. To be counted, all other work which had yet to be turned in must submitted by 4:30 PM on the last day of the Reading Period, December 16. Any final paper or project in the course must be turned in by Sunday, December 21, no later than 11:00 AM.
All work must be completed for you to receive a passing grade in the class; this is true whether you are taking the course for a letter grade or the Pass/Fail option. In other words, to pass the course, you must do all the assignments.

Plagiarism and the Honor Code:

All students must sign an "Honor Code" for all assignments. This pledge states: "I affirm that I have adhered to the Honor Code in this assignment." For further information, see the student Honor Code. If you have questions about what constitutes plagiarism, particularly in the context of joint or collective work, please see me or raise it in class.

Attendance, Tardiness, Class Behavior, Accommodation

I expect (and require) that you will attend the class regularly because you want to, because you understand that you can't fully participate in your own learning if you're not there; and because you understand this is a seminar and you have a responsibility to your classmates to contribute. I also understand that you may have to miss a class; I will trust that your reason is a valid one (health, family emergency) and do not require documentation. If you miss more than 2 classes, I will begin to deduct from your grade. (Please see me if you have a legitimate reason for missing more than 2.)

If you have a documented disability and wish to discuss academic accommodations, please contact me as soon as possible.

Readings:

Books that are recommended for purchase will be on reserve at the library or can be obtained at the bookstore, via OHIOlink, or an on-line bookseller such as Amazon.com. A number of the books are available electronically via the library's website. I have linked these books in the syllabus. You will find all other required readings that are not available digitally on BLACKBOARD. They are organized by week, but since the only readings posted to Blackboard are those not available in other ways, make sure you are doing ALL the readings listed on the syllabus for that day.

Background Reading:

The Mexican Revolution has generated a huge amount of historical examination. It probably has the most thorough historiography of any event in Latin America's 20th century history. Because this historiography is so active and lively, I am reluctant to assign a single text to "explain" the Revolution. Nonetheless, we will be using a new text by Gil Joseph and Jurgen Buchenau, Mexico's Once and Future Revolution: Social Upheaval and the Challenge of Rule since the Late 19th Century (Durham: Duke, 2013). It should be able to give you a concise historical background. It is available in a digital
edition via the library. If you want other texts, I would recommend any of the following, each of which, of course, has its own perspective:


**Books Recommended for Purchase:**


Paco Ignacio Taibo II, '68 (Seven Stories Press), 2004.


**Optional for purchase:**


**Allen Memorial Art Museum**

This course is being offered this semester to be able to take advantage of the Allen Memorial Art Museum's focus on Latin American and Latino Art this year. Among other works that will be up are many of the prints and paintings that directly relate to our course. We will visit the museum as a class and I will be designing some assignments in conjunction with the exhibition.
Syllabus

Porfirio Díaz

Background to Revolution

Sept. 3: The Mexican Revolution: Narrating a nation

The introductory class will cover some aspects of Mexican history up to the end of the 19th century and raise some issues that are at the center of what we will be examining over the semester: (1) what is a “nation,” (2) what is “national identity” as opposed to (or in conjunction with) other identities one might have; (3) how do hegemonic (dominant) national identity come about; and (4) what are the various ways that this identity takes shape?

If you didn't take HIST 110, you should view the following videos as background: Mexican Liberalism from Juárez to the Porfiriato (22:05); The Porfiriato (17:27).

Reading:


Part I: The Revolutionary Whirlwind: 1910-1920

Sept. 10: In the thick of it

Historians try to provide a reasoned account of what happened and why which can only happen after the event/events themselves are over. We usually rely on journalists to give us a sense of events that are occurring while they are still happening. Here, we’ll rely on
the perspective of a novelist, albeit one who was a participant, to help us understand what it feels like to be immersed in a conflict. The questions we want to explore have to do with how can we begin to characterize the participants, conflicts, and goals of some of those involved in what we will come to call the Mexican Revolution. Discussion will focus on The Underdogs, with the other readings serving as background.

Reading:


Photograph: Pancho Villa and his staff

Sept. 17: Creating national heroes: Villa

A sense of national identity often is rooted in the set of heroes we venerate (and villains we despise. In the case of Mexico, two larger-than-life individuals are often seen as the foremost representatives of the Mexican Revolution, particularly during this first decade of bloodshed: Francisco (Pancho) Villa and Emiliano Zapata. This week we will consider Villa and what his location in the pantheon of revolutionary heroes tells us. The reading from Reed, who spent time with Villa and his troops, is the closest to the action.

Reading:


Sept. 24: Creating national heroes: Zapata
(NOTE: Class will be rescheduled)

More than Villa (why, we will ask), Zapata has become the iconic representative of the Mexican Revolution, a figure seemingly allowed to visually represent the Revolution even though he was assassinated by enemies in its leadership. Womack’s biography from 1968 - note the date! - is the beginning point for those using English-language sources to study Zapata. And how does Womack present him to us? We’ll go to the Allen to view the lithograph of Zapata (to the left) by David Alfaro Siqueiros, as well as its companion piece by Diego Rivera.

Reading:
Oct. 1: Stepping back: The Mexican Revolution as memory and history

This week we step back from some of the on-going events of the early years of the Revolution to question how history does its work and what is its relationship to memory.

Reading:


Benjamin, “History: The Work of Concord and Unification,” La Revolución, Chapter 6 (pp. 137-151).


Part II: Inventing Mexico and Lo Mexicano: 1920-1940
Oct. 8: Inventing Mexico - *Mexicanidad*

*If the first decade of the Mexican Revolution was about destruction and bloodshed, the next two decades are at the center of some of the most creative processes attempting to define what had been consolidated militarily. Many of these have to do with what it means to be “Mexican.” This will be defined a number of ways, often via race or culture. This week we’ll examine two iconic approaches: José Vasconcelo’s argument about “mestizaje,” and Octavio Paz’s invention of the “Pachuc.”*

**Recommended Background Reading:**
Joseph and Buchenau, *Mexico’s Once and Future Revolution*, Chs. 5, 6, 7.

**Reading:**


Oct. 15: Inventing Indians: *Indigenismo*

*If the indigenous population of Mexico had been oppressed and despised by elites in Mexico since the time of the Spanish Conquest, they would be given a particular representational status after the Mexican Revolution. This didn’t mean that they wouldn’t continue to make up the lowest economic and social classes in Mexico, but it did require that they be "re-invented" be oppressed and despised, but they would have to be re-invented. In this week, we explore one historian’s take on how that was accomplished.*
Reading:


Oct. 22: Fall Break

Oct. 29: Inventing the campesino

The easiest translation of "campesino" is "peasant." Yet the idea of the "campesino" is quite different. We explore here the way that country people, via an activist framework, become something else: campesinos.

Reading:

Nov. 5: Re-imaging religion:
Conflicts between religious authority and secular authority were a constant feature in Mexico since the coming of independence in the early 19th century. This doesn't mean that the "secularists" were anti-Catholic; but they were certainly opposed to the dominant social, political and economic role that the Church had come to play. In the Revolution, as well, leaders were fundamentally anti-Church, some were anti-Catholic, and the Church's vast influence was threatened. At a popular level, though, religion continued to play a major role.
Reading:

Boyer, *Becoming Campesinos*, Ch. 5-7 (pp. 154-241).


![Frida Kahlo, "The Two Fridas" (1939), Collection of the Museo de Arte Moderno, Mexico City](image)

Nov. 12: Women in the Revolution

*At every moment of the Revolution, the role, status, and participation of women was negotiated, fought over and re-imagined.*

Reading:

Nov. 19: Art & Revolution

In this week we turn from considering the various identities that were reimagined in the course of the Mexican Revolution toward an examination of the mechanisms through which the revolution sought to bring this new national identity to the people. Art was at the center of the process. What can it tell us?

Reading:


Manifesto issued by the Union of Technical Workers, Painters, and Sculptors, 1922.
Part III: The Imagined Nation Falls Apart

Nov. 26: 1968/1985: The breaking point [Note: Class will be rescheduled]

While the tensions which underlay the early decades of the Mexican Revolution rarely reached the violent levels of the first decade, they were there. Full scale rebellions broke out with the so-called “Cristero” rebellions of the 1930s and the Jaramillo revolt in the 1940s. But most observers agree that, by 1940, the conservative wing of the Revolution (pro-business, closer to the Church, closer to U.S. interests) had won. While this consolidation produced decades of seemingly stable one-party rule, the tenuousness of that became evident in 1968, and more so after the 1985 earthquake. How do Taibo and Poniatowska characterize it?

Reading:
Paco Ignacio Taibo II, ’68 (Seven Stories Press, 2004)


Dec. 3: Mexican distemper

Does the return of Zapata (via the Zapatistas) suggest that the Revolution is dead? Or has it never been implemented? We examine the disintegration of the imagined Revolution and the possibilities of a new one by examining Amores Perros and studying the Zapatista rebellion.

Reading:
Joseph and Buchenau, Mexico’s Once and Future, Ch. 8 (The Embers of Revolution, 1968-2000), pp. 167-196.

Selected readings from The Mexico Reader. pp. 590-686 (including: Letter to Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas; Corazón del Rocanrol; I Don’t Believe Them at All; Identity Hour, or, What Photos Would You Take of the Endless City?; The COCEI of Juchitán,
December 10: Where to from here?

With the defeat of the PRI in 2000 and its reemergence in 2012 with the electoral victory of Enrique Peña Nieto, can we say that the Mexican Revolution is dead? What, if anything, remains of the original impulse from 1910? We will conclude the class by looking back and looking forward.

Reading:

Joseph and Buchenau, Mexico’s Once and Future, Conclusion (197-215).