

on concepts such as bioregionalism, and on other multidisciplinary and/or place-based topics. The Western Writers Series may be reached at English Department, Boise State University, Boise, ID 83725 (tel. 208-385-3584).

UNIVERSITY OF NEVADA, RENO

—MICHAEL P. BRANCH



***A New Time for Mexico* by Carlos Fuentes. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997; 220 pp. \$12.95 paper.**

A New Time for Mexico, a book of politics by celebrated author Carlos Fuentes first came out last year in an English paperback version. In light of events in Mexico—of the killing of indigenous Chiapan peasants—the calm has been broken, and recent works which comment on Mexico's social reality are welcome interpretations of the times.

Fuentes' book is uneven, but at times powerfully erudite, especially when speaking of Mexico's living past and when championing pluralism. Reports, on the other hand, of Mexico's 1994 economic collapse at the hands of inept domestic policymakers and naive international investors have been told elsewhere in more vivid detail, namely by Jorge Casteñeda in *The Mexican Shock* and by the *Miami Herald's* Andres Oppenheimer (see my review of *Bordering on Chaos*).

Only for those unfamiliar with such writings will this be fresh. These readers may still find themselves numbed by the mantra—i.e. of the need for local democracy and a national pact for democracy—that makes the middle of this book seem like separate essays cobbled together without an editor's help.

However, these deficiencies should not detract from the book's overall power. As Fuentes writes of our relationship with Mexico, "nothing will be gained by mutual ignorance." Fuentes' book is most effective when lyrical, when he attempts to describe the vitality of the past in Mexico. The recurring theme is best stated by Quevedo, a Spanish poet, "only the fleeting lasts and endures." Or as Fuentes writes, "The paradox of time in Mexico is that when its promises are kept they self-destruct and when they remain unfulfilled they go on living forever" (17). The Spanish Conquest in effect becomes a conquest of the Spanish through *mestizaje*, that almost complete racial mixing in Mexico which gave rise to a new time, a new culture. Likewise, the aspirations of Mexico's profound Revolution continually cycle back again when unfulfilled. It is no wonder that the Zapatistas evoked the name of the great revolutionary leader as their guiding symbol.

There is, as a result of the vitality of the past in contemporary Mexico, a constant tension between modernity and tradition. Here Fuentes writes, "This implies, at every stage of Mexican history, an adjustment between past and present whose most original feature is admitting the presence of the past" (29). Culture has an important role in countering the evils of extreme nationalism and in creating a healthy national identity and making visible the marginalized, the poor, the indigenous. "How can we make a safe transition from the profane to the sacred?" writes Fuentes (29). "The answer lies in a ritual universe where the masters of the magic arts, the shamans, those who know, those who name, those

who sing, occupy the privileged space" (29).

For it is through our history expressed through art, history, and literature that we come to know and define ourselves collectively, without which "we would be shadows without substance, reasoners without vocabulary" (187).

Having taught in a number of U. S. universities, Fuentes is also eminently qualified to accurately assess our ills. He attests that our flus are shared—most notably felt in the 1994 peso crash. We—Mexico and the U. S.—mutually infect each other.

Fuentes' passionate call for a politics of local democracy and respect for pluralism has considerable relevance for the U. S., particularly because a significant and growing part of the plural U. S. scene is that of Mexican immigrants and culture. This is not a process to be feared, for pluralism gives spice and vigor to our culture. Imagine our state without Tex-Mex cuisine and Tejano music. "Let us not fear cultural contamination" he writes. "We are all of us living through stages in the unending process of *mestizaje*" (210).

Because our singular culture is a product of pluralism, Fuentes writes that we can only have that cultural unity if our politics are plural. For an "authentically representative" politics, Fuentes calls for devolution, for local democracy. Here he presents great optimism for the capacity for self-government which borders on naiveté.

Having worked for nearly a year in grassroots development in Ecuador, I know that too often communities are divided, disorganized, and fatalistic about their prospects. I'm all for such devolution, but it will be no easy road. I'm sobered by journalist Robert Kaplan, who wrote in a recent issue of *Atlantic Monthly* that democracy, where interest groups battle out their positions through persuasion rather than violence, is predicated on an educated middle class with such democratic aspirations. In the absence of such cultural conditions, democracy ignites divisive and violent passions—ethnic, racial, or otherwise.

In Mexico, the educated, prosperous north is surely ready for such democratic change, but what about Chiapas where the organic unity of the indigenous is a fiction, where communities are factionalized along party lines and women and children are horribly murdered in church?

Fuentes is aware that devolution in this setting may give rise to local strongmen rather than popular control. In another section, he writes that "there cannot be a democratic society without cultural continuity" (64). In Mexico, there was a revolution which made democratic aspiration available to all. Since 1968's murder of protesting students before the Olympics, the Mexican people have been less willing to delay political gains in exchange for stability. It is a new time now that the system no longer can even deliver stability.

To try again to institute true democracy, as President Cárdenas attempted in the 1940s with worker-controlled cooperatives, Fuentes calls for national will to create a climate for the social sector to flourish. Still, we must wonder if, in Mexico, democracy won't get bastardized and become a sanitized, internationally acceptable facade much like our own emerging oligarchy.

Fuentes is to be feted for his elegant and impassioned call for mutual understanding between our two countries. In the absence of such efforts, the tendency for nationalism, U. S. and Mexican, can yield the bitter fruit of racism,

resentment, and violence which belies the great economic and cultural importance we share. This promise of exchange must guide an informed dialogue if small-minded leaders are not to stain our relations in the future.

PEACE CORPS, SAN JOSE DE POALÓ, ECUADOR

—JOSH BUSBY

