



Mexico and the Survey of Public Lands: The Management of Modernization, 1876-1911

Robert H. Holden

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In shaping modern Mexico, few events have been more crucial than the division of public lands. Drawing on previously untapped sources, Holden offers the first systematic study of prerevolutionary Mexico's public land surveys. He examines the role of private survey companies hired by the governments of Manuel González and Porfirio Díaz, demonstrating that the companies were both the agents and the beneficiaries of the greatest single movement of public property in Mexico's history.

In a controversial process involving landholders, judges, lawyers, and politicians, survey companies reaped in compensation one-third of all the land they surveyed. Holden reports that in one decade, from 1883 to 1893, up to fifty private companies received 18.4 million hectares of land, approximately one-tenth the total area of Mexico.

Basing his study on official archival records, Holden details the conflicts between private and public interests, challenging long-held impressions about the surveying companies. He shows how the state used private surveyors to insulate itself from the politically risky consequences of the surveys. Rejecting the view that the companies were the instruments of a land-hungry elite that worked alongside a corrupt government to plunder the peasantry, Holden concludes that the federal government generally respected landholders' claims in disputes with the surveyors.

Arguing that the Mexican government acted more flexibly and autonomously than has been recognized, Holden explores the state's management of such conflicting interests as maintaining peace in the countryside and furnishing clear titles to property. He interprets government attempts to "recover" survey-company land grants after 1920 mainly as efforts to strengthen state authority in the countryside.

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