

History/Women's Studies 357

Mexican History, Culture and Cosmovision

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Augsburg General Education Requirements

This course meets a Humanities Liberal Arts Foundations(LAF) requirement at Augsburg College. It is also course cross-listed as a Women's Studies (WST) course and a History (HIS) course, so you may register for credit in either field.

Purpose of the Course

The primary purpose of this course is to explore Mexican history, culture, and cosmovision from a gendered perspective, focusing on the role of women in Mexican history from pre-Columbian times to the present day. Since women's history has often been ignored, this course seeks to apply feminist analysis to the study of Latin American history and to foster an appreciation for "her-stories"—diverse women's distinct voices in history. Particular emphasis will be placed on cultural issues.

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Required Readings

1. Bonfil-Batalla, Guillermo. *Mexico Profoundo: Reclaiming a Civilization*. Austin: U. of Texas, 1996 (ch. 1-4).
2. Carrasco, David. *Religions of Mesoamerica: Cosmovision and Ceremonial Centers*. Waveland Press, 1998.
3. Hernandez-Castillo, R. Aida. *Histories and Stories from Chiapas: Border Identities in Southern Mexico*. Austin: U. of Texas, 2001.
4. Munoz-Ramirez, Gloria. *The Fire and the Word: A History of the Zapatista Movement*. San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2008.
5. Hellman, Judith Adler. *The World of Mexican Migrants: The Rock and the Hard Place*. NY: The New Press, 2008.
6. Wain, Carol M., ed. *Debating Immigration*. NY: Cambridge U. Press, 2008.
7. Tuñón, Julia. *Women in Mexico: A Past Unveiled*. Austin: University of Texas, 1999.

After arrival in Cuernavaca, we will provide a supplementary reading packet that will include excerpts from several other texts, such as Miguel Leon-Portilla's *Broken Spears*, Octavio Paz's *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, "Olympics and Tlatelolco," and "Mexico and the United States," and the book *Dissident Women: Gender and Cultural Politics in Chiapas*, edited by Speed, Hernandez-Castillo, and Stephens.

Course Description

This course explores Mexican history, culture, and cosmovision from a gendered perspective, focusing on the role of women in Mexican history from pre-Columbian times to the present day. Throughout the course we will employ a broad definition of "culture" as "a learned set of shared interpretations about beliefs, values, and norms, which affect the behaviors of a relatively large group of people" (Lustig and Koester 1999). This definition of culture includes not only ethnic groups such as the Aztec and Maya, but also groups based on gender, socio-economic class, ethnicity, race, geographic region, and nationality (Collier and Thomas 1988).

The course combines this broad definition of culture with the Latin American concept of “comovision,” a term commonly used by Mexican historians and anthropologists to refer to the “worldview” of indigenous and mestizo people. The term comes from the words “cosmos” + “vision”: view of the cosmos, and encompasses particular cultural understandings of the interrelationships between humans and the natural world, including their orientation to time, space, and cosmos. Mexican historian David Carrasco defines “cosmovision” as “the ways in which Mesoamericans combine their cosmological notions relating to time and space into a structured and systematic worldview.” (Carrasco 1998) It is important to note that throughout the course we will explore the cosmovisions of diverse groups within Mexico because, as postcolonial feminist scholars point out, there is no single Mexican “master narrative” of history, just as there is no one single group of Mexicans but rather many Mexicans with diverse histories and “herstories” (Waller and Marcos 2005).

Through readings, lectures, excursions, songs, films, and discussion, we will explore the experiences of women, indigenous peoples, and other diverse cultural groups throughout Mexican history, paying special attention to diverse groups’ own portrayal of their history and culture. Although outsiders often portray the Spanish Conquest as having destroyed indigenous cultures, Mexican historians call attention to the many different ways in which diverse groups have found creative ways to resist and keep elements of their cosmovision alive while adapting to modern society, developing what Guillermo Bonfil Batalla refers to as “Mexico profundo” (Bonfil 1996). As a result of this, Mexican religious, cultural, and gender identities are constantly being formed and transformed over time. As we study Mexican history, culture and cosmovisions, we will attempt to trace not only the development of gender, class-based, and racial oppression but also the ways in which historical resistance to such oppression has marked the many different Mexican identities. In this, we will explore how specific historical agents, such as indigenous people, mestizos, people of African descent, women, and contemporary resistance movements like the EZLN have impacted the culture and cosmovision.

Throughout the course, we will try to help you become familiar with historical methodology and deepen your understanding of history as a discipline, as well as develop an appreciation for feminist contributions to the discipline. You will analyze historical documents from a gendered perspective. You will also visit historic sites and engage in dialogue with Mexican historians and feminist scholars. In addition, you will listen to oral histories and discuss the role that oral tradition plays in informing, maintaining and transforming diverse groups of Mexicans’ understandings of their history, culture, and cosmovision.

This course is an integral part of the “Migration and Globalization: Engaging Our Communities” program. Due to the experiential methodology employed, you will be exposed to diverse contemporary perspectives regarding Mexican history, culture, and cosmovision. These perspectives are produced by historical actors with worldviews very different from dominant perspectives in the United States. Hence, you will be encouraged to reflect critically on your own positionality and the cultural perspectives you bring to bear on course materials and content. Throughout the course we will compare and contrast dominant and non-dominant cultural patterns, beliefs, and behaviors in the U.S. and Mexico with the goal of developing intercultural communication skills.

Teaching Methodology

You will be given a course interest survey and an ungraded quiz or “pre-test” to assess your prior knowledge, as well as your level of interest in specific course topics. As instructors, we will try to incorporate your knowledge and interests into the course design to the extent possible. However, since students’ background knowledge, interests, and learning styles vary greatly within every group, it is impossible to satisfy every student. Moreover, part of education is being stretched outside one’s own comfort zone. Nonetheless, you should feel free to talk with us about ways to conduct independent research and/or tailor some of the assignments to your own interests and/or learning styles. If you have any questions or concerns, please talk with us as soon as possible.

Teaching strategies include lectures by the instructor; group discussions of required readings and experiences; films; spontaneous journaling exercises; use of artwork and music which express course-related themes; field trips; guest lectures; dialogue with a wide range of people expressing diverse viewpoints; participant observation, and interviews. Particular attention is given to story-telling, particularly by members of groups whose voices have been silenced. There will also be field trips to historical sites in Mexico and guest lectures by Latin American historians, sociologists, anthropologists, and other actors in society who come from diverse socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds. Field trips will likely include encounters with urban workers, peasant-farmers (campesinos), indigenous people, government representatives, political activists; politicians, indigenous people; and people of African descent. In addition, when scheduling guest speakers and other encounters, priority is given to women and to other individuals and groups who have been marginalized and under-represented in academia. One of the excursions that is an integral part of this course is a 4-day rural homestay and seminar in the Nahua indigenous community Amatlan de Quetzalcoatl.

Due to the fact that approximately half of class time is spent listening to guest speakers, you are encouraged to develop your strategic questioning and listening skills. It is very important that for you to ask informed questions and share your own interests, opinions, and experiences with speakers so you are not just educational consumers but partners in a common quest to learn more about the issues being studied.

During internal class discussion sessions (those not involving guest lectures or excursions), we will try to apply principles of experiential, critical, and feminist pedagogies by encouraging you to reflect upon both cognitive and affective learning and to draw upon your own prior life experiences, as well as new experiences in Mexico.

Engaging Our Communities” Lab Groups

Since this course is taught as an integral part of the “Migration and Globalization: Engaging Our Communities” semester program, you will be asked to consider your own group of co-learners as a community “laboratory” because many of the same issues that require positive engagement in society at large can be found within the smaller microcosms of student groups. Therefore, in addition to our regular weekly internal class sessions, “engaging our communities” lab groups” facilitated by your T.A. will meet throughout the semester. Active participation in the lab group includes planning and facilitating (or co-facilitating) at least one hour of a lab group session in coordination with the T.A. You will sign up near the beginning of the semester. At least 48 hours prior to the lab group session, you must submit a short proposal that outlines the topic(s) you plan to address and the specific lab group objectives you will fulfill. You will then meet with your T.A. to discuss the proposal and plans for the session. At the time of the session, you must submit a one-page outline. The T.A. and other students will be asked to complete a short feedback form at the end of the session, and you will be expected to submit your own completed self-assessment form. Be sure to read the separate handout.

Primary Themes Covered in this Course

1. Mexican History from Pre-Columbian times to the Present
2. Mexican Culture and Cosmivision: Past and Present
3. The History and Legacies of the Spanish Conquest
4. Cultural Issues in U.S.-Mexico Relations
5. U.S.-Mexico Relations from the U.S.-Mexico War to Contemporary Debates on Undocumented Immigration
6. Contemporary Social Movements in Mexican History: Indigenous Rights and the EZLN

Learning Objectives/Outcomes

Over the course of the semester, you will be expected to be able to:

1. Identify important aspects of pre-Columbian civilizations in Mexico and provide examples of the ways in which they still influence Mexican culture and cosmovision today.
2. Discuss the clash of cultures that took place in Latin America as a result of the Spanish conquest and the impact of the Conquest on different racial and ethnic groups in Latin America, including women, indigenous peoples, people of African descent, the economically disenfranchised, and other marginalized groups.
3. Analyze the historical development of gender, class-based, and racial oppression in Mexico and throughout Latin America from pre-Columbian times to the present day.
4. Discuss the diverse roles that women of different backgrounds have played in Mexican history from pre-Columbian days to the present.
5. Identify key moments in the history of resistance and social change in Mexico and throughout Latin America.
6. Analyze the role of U.S. foreign policy in Mexico both historically and currently, with emphasis upon economic policies and U.S. immigration policies;
7. Identify divergent perspectives within Mexico regarding the impacts of economic globalization on diverse populations.
8. Analyze the complex relationship between economic globalization, migration, emigration
9. Explain the historical and cultural factors that led to the emergence of revolutionary movements throughout Latin America during the 20th century and the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) in the 21st century.
10. Apply feminist analysis to the study of Mexican and Latin American history and deepen your appreciation for “her-stories”– diverse women’s distinct voices in history.
11. Analyze the role that oral tradition plays in informing, maintaining and transforming people’s understanding of the history, culture, and cosmovision.
12. Discuss the relationship between history and culture, identifying some of the ways in which history shapes cultural values and the ways in which cultural values shape one’s understanding of history.
13. Critically reflect upon your own cultural perspectives and the ways these influence their understanding of history and yourselves as historical actors and shapers of culture

Course Requirements (100%)

1. **Class Participation (20%):** Effective class participation involves active participation in class sessions involving guest lectures, other experiential activities, internal class sessions, and lab group sessions. Please note that class participation is required for a passing grade. Because participation is essential to the learning process, if you miss class activities for any reason, you must speak to the instructor prior to class and make arrangements to complete a short assignment. After one absence, your participation grade will be affected. Absences due to religious holidays and illness are considered excused absences. However, you still must inform the instructors of such absences in advance and discuss how to make up the missed session/s; otherwise your class participation grade will be affected. You are also responsible for obtaining notes, handouts, and announcements from other students if you arrive late to class or miss a class session. Absences for personal travel or visits from family or friends are not excused absences. Class participation includes:
 - **Active Participation in Class Sessions Involving Guest Speakers and/or Excursions (5%):** This includes engaging in informed dialogue with speakers, asking probing questions related to required readings or other speakers, and sharing your own thoughts and experiences, as appropriate. Be sure to take notes that respond to the following types of questions: What are the speaker’s main points or arguments? What insights have you gained from this talk? What is confusing to you? What do you need clarified? What inspires you and/or angers you? How does it support and/or contradict previous notions you have had and/or articles and books you have read? About what would you like to learn more? What questions for further exploration do you have as a result of this talk?

- **Active Participation in In-House Class Sessions (5%):** You will be expected to demonstrate your comprehension of assigned readings by participating in class discussions, debates, role plays, in-class writing exercises, and/or completing other assignments in class that will not receive a specific grade but are considered part of class participation. Failure to come prepared to class by completing required readings in advance will seriously affect your class participation grade.
 - **Active Participation in Lab Group and Facilitation of a Lab Group Session (5%):** Details will be provided on a separate handout later.
- 2. Interdisciplinary Blog and Photo-Essay (5%):** You will be responsible for preparing one blog entry (with photos attached) as well as at least 1 response to an entry written on your group's blog by one of your peers and two responses to the blog entries by your peers. The purpose of the blog is to develop a collective weekly photo essay and public journal reflecting what you are learning throughout the semester from multiple lenses and voices so that you can share some of what you learning with people back home and to create an international dialogue about important cultural and global issues. This is one of many ways in which you can fulfill the frequent request of guest speakers to take action and educate others about what you are learning in Mexico. See separate handout for detailed instructions, ethical guidelines, and grading criteria. Deadlines: Mondays of the three weeks for which you sign up for creating a blog or posting blog responses.
 - 3. Two Short Papers (20%):** With the exception of the first paper, which will focus exclusively on the Adler Hellman book, you will write two papers in which you will be asked to make connections between what you have learned from required readings and class discussions and your experiences in Mexico, drawing upon guest speakers, excursions, and intercultural interactions with Mexican host families, friends, and others. Specific instructions will be distributed for each paper. Please see the description of the 1st paper below, as it is due on Thurs., January 27.
 - 4. Two In-Class Exams (20%):** You will complete two in-class exams demonstrating your knowledge of key events in Mexican history and key concepts in Mexican culture and cosmovision.
 - 5. Independent Research Project and Oral Presentation (20%):** During the last month of the semester, you will conduct independent research on a topic of interest related to the course themes of Mexican history, culture, and cosmovision. You will then create a project that you can use to educate others about the topic upon return to your university and/or home community. See separate handout for details.