

BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

Alcohol and Ambivalence in Mexico and the Americas

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This essay reviews the following works:

Divided Spirits: Tequila, Mezcal, and the Politics of Production. By Sarah Bowen. Oakland: University of California Press, 2015. Pp. xvii + 260. \$29.95 paper. ISBN: 9780520281059.

Alcohol in Latin America: A Social and Cultural History. Edited by Gretchen Pierce and Áurea Toxqui. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2014. Pp. vii + 306. \$60.00 cloth. ISBN: 9780816530762.

Alcohol and Nationhood in Nineteenth-Century Mexico. By Deborah Toner. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2015. Pp. vi + 346. \$30.00 paper. ISBN: 9780803274327.

Historically, few agricultural substances have been the source of such ambivalent perceptions as alcoholic intoxicants. Scholarly work on the topic therefore not only must contend with alcohol's geographic and social pervasiveness throughout Latin America; it must also attend to these conflicting positions. On the one hand, alcohol is at the center of daily and ritual life in many communities across the region; on the other, it has frequently been a destructive force both physically and socioeconomically. Thus, should alcohol be considered alongside other foods and food-related practices as a substance that fosters commensality and the expression of group identities? Or is it better contextualized alongside other drugs, whose deleterious effects have made them subject to intense public scrutiny, regulation, and even prohibition?

When we pay attention to the more recent circulation of Latin American beer, wine, and spirits as specialized global commodities, questions of value, taste, origin, and sustainability also emerge. It is telling, for instance, that the Mexican government established a geographical indication (GI) for its tequila back in 1974, making it the oldest legally recognized GI outside of Europe.¹ Usually associated with place-based wine and cheese (e.g., Bordeaux and Roquefort), as well as other agricultural products, such designations confer not only monetary value but also value as intellectual property or cultural heritage.² Critically, the global boom in certain alcoholic products, for instance, has left some aficionados around the world wringing their hands: How should one feel, returning to the United States from a *mezcal* tour in Oaxaca, Mexico, when your new favorite mezcal is featured in the airline's in-flight magazine? In my own fieldwork on the subject, I have heard more than one connoisseur celebrate that mezcal is finally getting the coverage it deserves, only to bemoan its "overexposure" in the same breath.

All three volumes reviewed here grapple with some combination of these issues, relying on interdisciplinary methods and theories culled from the humanities and social sciences. Unlike earlier studies of alcohol that date to the 1970s and were usually connected with social histories of crime and rebellion, these works simultaneously acknowledge the vital role of alcohol in the fabric of everyday life. Following scholarly trends, they focus primarily on Mexico and the Southern Cone, with the iconic agave-derived beverages from Mexico receiving the lion's share of attention. Sarah Bowen's *Divided Spirits* is dedicated entirely to

¹ Nationally referred to as a *denominación de origen* (denomination of origin, or DO).

² Ronda L. Brulotte and Michael A. Di Giovine, eds., *Edible Identities: Food as Cultural Heritage* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

the distillates mezcal and tequila, while Deborah Toner's social and cultural history of alcohol in Mexico foregrounds tequila, mezcal, and *pulque* (a fermented agave beverage).³ Gretchen Pierce and Áurea Toxqui's edited volume, too, gives agave drinks their due. However, here readers will find a more comprehensive picture of Latin American alcohol production and consumption; this includes chapters on Brazilian *cachaça* (a sugarcane spirit), Argentinian wine, *chicha de manzana* (hard apple cider) from Chile, and fermented beverages made in the pre-Columbian Andes from a variety of raw materials (corn, peanuts, a native fruit called *molle*, and other plants), all of which were subsumed under the colonial umbrella term of *chicha*.

Toner focuses on mid-nineteenth-century Mexico and the ambivalence surrounding the role of alcohol in society as the fledgling nation struggled to define itself in the wake of independence. Methodologically her analysis deviates from the well-trodden path of historical scholarship on the period of early nationhood by bringing an interdisciplinary synthesis of archival records, medical texts, and government publications to bear on select literary texts. In the introduction, Toner clearly defines a series of concerns linking alcohol, literary production, and the national project. She asks, "How did nineteenth-century fiction contribute to nation-building processes? What opportunities and problems did the drinking customs of the Mexican population create for fiction writers trying to celebrate Mexican culture and nationhood? How did alcohol feature in novels that sought to promote a patriotic spirit, a model of liberal citizenship, or a more scientific understanding of society?" (xii). The Janus-faced nature of alcohol is evidenced by its wide-ranging representations in nineteenth-century Mexican literature.

Before delving further, it is important to note that Mexican preoccupations with drinking and drunkenness were not unique to the nineteenth century. Though recent, if controversial, studies aim to prove the existence of pre-Hispanic distillation technology, there is ample evidence that fermented alcoholic intoxicants were widespread in Mexico prior to the arrival of the Spanish.⁴ These substances were important not only from a nutritional standpoint but from a ritual one as well. From the *tesgüino* (corn beer) brewed by Rarámuri (or Tarahumara) people in the northwest to the pulque consumed throughout the central highlands, fermented alcoholic drinks featured prominently in communal, ritual gatherings. In the highly stratified world of the ancient Aztecs, alcohol was considered a physically and symbolically potent substance. As such, it was tightly controlled. Access was limited to elites, with exceptions made for the elderly and pregnant women among commoners, and public drunkenness was not tolerated.

During colonial times, imbibing became firmly ingrained in Mexican popular culture, albeit under the critical gaze of elites. The colonial social order revolved around fine-grained caste distinctions that were shaped not only by one's parentage but also by taste and consumption habits. Eating *bolillos* (wheat French rolls) and drinking wine or cognac, for instance, were markers of European civility, whereas consuming corn tortillas and agave-based drinks—mezcal and, especially, pulque—connoted low status.⁵ More specifically, "drunkenness became a stigma attached to the indigenous identity, along with sinfulness, barbarism, idolatry and other failings discursively associated with indigeneity" (Toner, xxv).

Fast-forward to the Mexican Revolution (1910–1920) and the period thereafter. There were still deep concerns about lower-class debauchery, including the barrier alcohol represented to indigenous assimilation to mestizo society. Nevertheless, a nascent national identity (glossed in Spanish as "*mexicanidad*") proudly appropriated cantina culture and its valiant, tequila-swilling archetype, exemplified by revolutionary hero Pancho Villa. Even though Villa himself was a teetotaler in real life and spearheaded prohibition in Mexico, deft marketing campaigns forever linked Villa's image to the now iconic Mexican spirit in the national cultural imaginary. A successful national film and music industry reinforced these ideas among its consumer base throughout the Americas. The golden age of Mexican cinema, the three decades roughly spanning the 1930s–1960s, featured scenes of agave-filled landscapes and protagonists drowning their sorrows over

³ Mezcal is an umbrella terms that refers to agave-derived distillates. Tequila is a type of Mexican mezcal with its own denomination of origin, which stipulates that it may only be produced from one type of agave and only in particular regions (predominantly in, but not limited to, Jalisco State). At the same time, mezcal has its own denomination of origin, more recently established than tequila's, which also specifies the conditions under which it may be produced.

⁴ Claims made by ethnoarchaeologists affiliated with the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) based on material remains found outside of Tlaxcala. For an example of Mexican media coverage of the story, see "El mezcal es un destilado prehispánico," *El universal*, March 9, 2016, <http://www.eluniversal.com.mx/articulo/menu/2016/03/9/el-mezcal-es-un-destilado-prehispanico>. See also Henry J. Bruman, *Alcohol in Ancient Mexico* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2000) for a thorough overview of the geographic distribution and range of techniques and materials employed in making fermented alcohols.

⁵ Jeffrey M. Pilcher, *¡Que vivan los tamales! Food and the Making of Mexican Identity* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998).

a bottle of tequila. Meanwhile, popular music genres such as *canciones rancheras* (country or rural songs) frequently celebrated drinking and cantina culture.⁶

Chronologically sandwiched between colonial and postrevolutionary society, nineteenth-century political, economic, and intellectual elites retained many negative colonial attitudes toward alcohol even as they recognized its potential as a unifying force in the creation of a modern yet authentically Mexican nation. Not surprisingly, the literature of the period reflects this ambivalence. Furthermore, as Toner demonstrates, nineteenth-century debates about alcohol are symptomatic of deeper anxieties of the elite about the breakdown of perceived social boundaries as well as the “desire for and fear of modernization” (xv). She suggests that elite anxieties about alcohol revolved around a set of key issues: (1) the spatial arrangement of public drinking spaces, particularly in growing urban areas such as Mexico City; (2) alcohol’s propensity to alternately subvert or reinforce gender norms associated with developing ideologies of liberal citizenship; (3) transforming lower-class, mixed-race, and indigenous populations into modern, patriotic subjects—populations that, left to their own devices, tended toward drunkenness, indolence, and gambling; and (4) the institutionalization of alcoholism as a medical concept in the late nineteenth- and early-twentieth centuries.

The (mostly male) writers of the time seized upon these themes. Sometimes they fell on one side or the other of the debate, but just as often they expressed the same ambivalent positions held by politicians charged with promoting “order and progress,” the official motto of President Porfirio Díaz’s dictatorial regime. Realist author Ángel de Campo (1868–1908), for example, acknowledged the necessity of popular drinking spaces as places of temporary escape for the socially downtrodden. Yet ultimately his short stories and in particular his novella *La Rumba* point to the irredeemable character of the urban poor, doomed to inhabit the squalid space of the neighborhood *pulquería* or cantina. Indeed, in the conclusion to *La Rumba* de Campo implies that the lower classes were better off living the lives for which they were destined, “without the temptations of greater wealth, education, and high society” (Toner, 51).

For de Campo and other writers of his time, including Manuel Payno and Ignacio Manuel Altamirano, popular drinking spaces were also the locus of the signifying practices associated with Mexican masculinity and gender hierarchies. There, within the gritty space of the urban cantina, the contradictory traits embodied in the Mexican “macho”—heterosexual virility, aggression, violence, and fatalism, on one hand, honor, fraternal loyalty, stoicism and generosity on the other—were prominently displayed. Despite these contradictions, writers nevertheless tended to dichotomize their male protagonists as either the patriotic hero who engaged in male homosocial bonding through drinking, or the violent, destructive drunk. Lower-class women who drank, whether in real life or as literary supporting characters, were overwhelming cast as overly masculine and sexually promiscuous, as well as socially irresponsible, with alcohol consumption assumed to impede their maternal duties.

The ambivalence toward alcohol took on a new dimension in the 1890s and early 1900s with the development of modern medical science, which approached alcohol not only as a social disease but also as a pathological one. The pseudoscientific methods of Mexican positivism worked in conjunction with literary representations of alcohol and alcoholism. Interestingly, in contrast to earlier portrayals, writers such as Federico Gamboa, Pedro Castera, and Amado Nervo represented “alcoholism, and the criminality, mental illness, and degeneration that alcoholism was thought to produce, as problems created by Mexico’s nascent modernity” (Toner, 191). In other words, alcohol was seen as an outcome of, rather than as an impediment to, the Porfirian regime’s modernization agenda.

While Mexican history obviously has its particularities, it would be remiss to ignore alcohol as a window to understanding similar historical dynamics throughout Latin America. This is precisely the aim of Pierce and Toxqui’s edited volume *Alcohol in Latin America: A Social and Cultural History*. The two historians begin from the premise that the production, commercialization, and consumption of alcohol were not separate from but instead integral to larger processes of identity formation; race, class, and gender politics; and nation building within the entire region. Organized into three broad historical sections—“The Pre-Hispanic and Colonial Periods,” “The Long Nineteenth Century (1820s–1930),” and “The Twentieth and Twenty-first Centuries”—the volume’s contributions draw on anthropology, archaeology, art history, ethnohistory, history, and literary studies. Such breadth means that certain topics and regions will inevitably be given short shrift. The vast area between Mexico and the Southern Cone is represented here by only by two essays

⁶ Marie Sarita Gaytán, *¡Tequila! Distilling the Spirit of Mexico* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014).

on Guatemala and the pre-Columbian Andean region, located primarily in modern-day Peru and Bolivia. Shortcomings aside, this expansive approach reveals several unifying themes and identifiable trends in recent scholarship on alcohol.

It is difficult to pinpoint exactly when people started making fermented drinks in the ancient Andean region, but the material record clearly points to the role alcohol played within and across communities. Archeologist Justin Jennings notes that hundreds of years before the Spanish arrived, “the majority of a household’s pots were dedicated to alcohol” (Pierce and Toxqui, 25). Outside of the individual household, fermented chicha was the bedrock of a system of patron-client feasts through which the Inca elite maintained rule over their highly stratified empire.

In another chapter, João Azevedo Fernandes focuses on the Brazilian sugarcane spirit known as *cachaça*, which initially was “a tool of colonial exploration, a means of slave trading, a form of dominating the indigenous peoples, and a symbol of social and cultural division between the colonial elite and their subjugate peoples” (Pierce and Toxqui, 60). The same elite later appropriated the drink as a symbol of national pride within the context of Brazilian political emancipation in the nineteenth century—mirroring, to some degree, the reversal of tequila’s image from lower-class drink to an iconic national spirit.

Part 2 of the book covers similar ground as Toner’s work described above. Newly independent Latin American nations struggled with how to define themselves, and alcohol was frequently a contested terrain for conflicting liberal and conservative values. There was one thing, though, that male elites of both political persuasions could agree on: women and the masses (mixed-race, indigenous, or of African descent) should not be granted the benefits of citizenship. Judgments about their consumption of alcohol—too much, the wrong kind, or, in the case of women, even drinking publically—served as a means to justify social exclusion.

Here again we encounter variations on the ambivalent attitudes toward alcohol and drinking so vividly captured by nineteenth-century Mexican writers. In Mexico, elite white women (as daughters, wives, and widows) often owned large agave plantations producing pulque, and *pulquerías*, while poor women of indigenous descent sold food outside of the latter. Their closely intertwined economic activities as pulque and food producers typically did not create female solidarity across class and racial divides; yet both groups of entrepreneurs were able strategically to enlist their economic productivity and their roles as breadwinners to push back periodically against laws and ordinances designed to circumscribe their presence to the domestic sphere.

In Guatemala, ladino elites associated alcohol with indigenous people, who faced disproportionately harsh legal sanctions for public inebriation. Yet despite the insidious discourse of the “drunk Indian,” historian David Carey Jr.’s close review of census records and police reports indicates that ladinos drank just as often and were often arrested in larger numbers for public drunkenness. This discrepancy between reality and perception, Carey concludes, stems from the contradictory fact that the Guatemalan state needed to “both profit from alcohol consumption and curtail the way that drunken poor and working-class men and women upset its image as an orderly civilized nation” (Pierce and Toxqui, 149).

Another chapter, by Nancy Hanway, asserts that while Argentine statesmen did not face the “Indian question” as they did in Mexico, Guatemala, or Peru, they nevertheless considered themselves the inheritors of a “barbaric” territory, whose only hope for civilization was through European immigration and notions of progress. One of the most prominent politicians and intellectuals of the period was statesman-author Domingo Faustino Sarmiento (1811–1888). Sarmiento was well known for his literary works, including the 1845 publication tellingly named *Facundo, o civilización y barbarie* (*Facundo, or, Civilization and Barbarism*). But he also played a critical role in the development of the modern Argentine wine industry, which he considered to be part of a larger political and social project of cultivation and whitening. Indeed, using the grapevine itself as a metaphor for his despair at the Argentine plebs, Sarmiento wrote, “Why are there no good wines, in a country so favorable to the culture of the vine? Because [the vine] whose first shoots were introduced three centuries ago, has perhaps degenerated, losing color or acquiring a disagreeable flavor from bad cultivation” (Pierce and Toxqui, 97). Wine itself was not the problem, according to Sarmiento. Rather, the sorry state of Argentine viticulture and the popular classes’ coarse consumption habits needed to be addressed if wine was ever to be the foundation for regional (e.g., Mendoza) and national identities based on modern agro-industrial production.

The twentieth and twenty-first centuries witnessed a massive shift in elite attitudes (as well as those of a burgeoning middle class) toward alcohol, and particularly locally produced intoxicants. As Part 3 of Pierce and Toxqui’s volume demonstrates, perhaps the most important transformation was alcoholic beverages’ commercialization and valorization as national industries, a process that was under way in the

late nineteenth century but was fully realized in the twentieth. However, this elevated status hinged in large part on establishing market networks and branding campaigns linking the global North and South.

The history of tequila, once again, proves instructive. Historian José Orozco chronicles the influential Sauza family in Jalisco, Mexico, whose patriarch Cenobio Sauza was the first maker to export the product to the United States, beginning in 1873. Demonstrating a keen understanding of consumer psychology, he recognized that for elite Mexicans to judge the drink acceptable, it would need to first gain favor among international consumers. By Orozco's account, Sauza went so far as to enter his tequila in the Chicago World's Fair in order to "highlight the ways in which mezcal was simultaneously an authentic product of Mexico and a clean, non-disgust-inducing, civilized, and cosmopolitan liquor like cognac, champagne, or brandy" (Pierce and Toxqui, 191). While tequila enjoyed a steady climb in popularity, the tequila boom came decades later, in the 1970s. Argentine wine producers followed a similar strategy, and enjoyed their own massive expansion in the 1980s. This period was characterized by a slick advertising campaign aimed at convincing international and national consumers that Argentine wine was as sophisticated as its European counterparts, and not the everyday drink found in most Argentine households.

Sociologist Sarah Bowen's *Divided Spirits* is an ideal text with which to conclude this essay, as her discussion of the contemporary politics surrounding the production of tequila and mezcal encapsulates many of the historical debates and ambivalent attitudes expressed toward alcohol since colonial times. Unlike the other works represented here, Bowen's primary focus is the concept of *terroir* ("the taste of place")⁷ and the legal frameworks that have been put into place to guarantee a product's authenticity. More specifically, she is concerned with the denominations of origin (DOs) codified by the Mexican government that are, in theory, meant to protect the reputation and quality of tequila and mezcal.

Like Orozco, Bowen dates tequila's transformation into a modern commercial product to the Porfiriato but notes that the drink's boom as a global commodity occurred in the 1970s. She attributes this phenomenon to a massive product rebranding by public and private organizations. Three institutions in particular worked in concert to define and establish tequila as an authentic product: the denomination of origin (DO), modeled on the European system of controlled appellations of origin, and the "quality standard" (both established in 1994), and the Consejo Regulador del Tequila (Tequila Regulatory Council). Bowen cites the official definition of a DO in Mexico, highlighting not only its environmental but also cultural factors: "the name of a geographical region of a country that serves to designate a product originating therein, the qualities and characteristics of which *are due exclusively to the geographical environment, including natural or human factors*" (66).

At first glance, the DO system seems a well-reasoned solution to protecting tequila as the heritage of all Mexicans. After all, it is premised on the idea that an agave spirit produced outside of the designated territory would not meet the intrinsic geographical, cultural, and quality standards to make it "tequila." However, upon deeper examination, Bowen reveals a system in which the DO does little to benefit those who are the real bearers of tradition: the agave farmers, small-scale producers, and others whose labor is exploited in order to turn humble plant matter into alcoholic elixir. The DO has become a bureaucratic labyrinth, one that requires both political and financial capital to navigate. Despite the growing global demand for tequila, those who maintain the supply have yet to reap the rewards of the largest commercial producers such as Sauza and José Cuervo—the former now one among many spirits owned by American corporation Suntory Spirits, headquartered in Deerfield, Illinois.⁸

Bowen frames DOs within larger processes of "gastronationalism," in which "states make strategic claims about the idea of nation as a protector of cultural patrimony within a neoliberal and globalizing context" (21). At its best, gastronationalism can manufacture collective pride and identities around somewhat nostalgic ideologies of food and drink; at its worst it represents a trickle-down economic model, in which, in the case of Mexico, multinational liquor companies have appropriated notions of tradition for their own financial gain. At the same time, "consumers increasingly fetishize the local, the obscure, the handcrafted—precisely those characteristics that are threatened by globalization" (62).

Bowen's account of inequality thus brings us full circle. The story of alcohol in Latin America is undoubtedly diverse and contingent upon the unique historical circumstances of each region. One may wonder what characteristics unite Argentine wine, Mexican pulque, and Brazilian cachaça other than their potency as

⁷ Amy B. Trubek, *The Taste of Place: A Cultural Journey into Terroir* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

⁸ See Chantal Martineau, *How the Gringos Stole Tequila: The Modern Age of Mexico's Most Traditional Spirit* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2015).

intoxicants. But as these recent works demonstrate, throughout history alcohol has been a site for the maintenance of social divisions: pre-Hispanic elites from commoners, racially marked individuals (whether indigenous or Afro-descendent) from European identified ones, the urban poor from the urban elite, and men from women. Add to this a growing trend toward cosmopolitanism in which consumers around the world seek to distinguish themselves from the ordinary through their consumption of prestige goods, both in the symbolic and monetary sense. One thing is clear: anxiety and ambivalence toward alcohol in the Americas historically has had as much to do with its potential negative physiological effects as its ability to destabilize or preserve the social order.

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