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## Knowing History in Mexico: An Ethnography of Citizenship by Trevor Stack

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**Stack, Trevor. *Knowing History in Mexico: An Ethnography of Citizenship*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2012. xv + 168 pages. Paperback, \$30.00.**

In *Knowing History in Mexico: An Ethnography of Citizenship*, anthropologist Trevor Stack examines the meaning of history and its influence on definitions of citizenship. Stack conducted ethnographic research in Mexico to answer some basic questions: What is history, and why do people seem to believe that knowing history creates good citizens? What is involved in knowing history and who is good at it? What do people gain from seeing themselves as good citizens? Stack spent five years living in towns and cities in Mexico, interacting daily with townspeople, listening to their stories, as well as studying academic and non-academic writings on the histories of towns, cities, and Mexico.

One of the strengths of the book is that history is a necessary element for understanding social interactions between society and people and for comprehending the impact of history on people's ideas about themselves and their construction of categories of difference. Stack examines the ways that people from various towns and cities see themselves as different, even as superior, to people from other places, even as all of the people are considered as citizens of Mexico and thought to have a shared national history.

A second strength of the book is that Stack understands the subjective nature of history as a way of knowing. He states, "I treat history as one kind of knowledge among many others, rather than setting it on a pedestal" (p. xiii). Through interviews with academic historians and people of many different occupations, he distinguishes between academic history and public history, and between state or national history versus the history of towns and cities, giving none of the various kinds of historical records precedence over the other. His focus on the differences between the various types of history strengthens his argument that "versions of history served to justify the interests of particular social groups" (p. 14).

Previous histories of America or other nations taught in schools at every level tend to give precedence to the history created by dominant groups or the most powerful groups in society. The content of these historical records often ignores the voices of marginalized and oppressed groups, and does not consider the individual histories of the various towns and cities. Stack values the histories told by all the different people in his study.

A third strength is the extensive use of quotes from people regarding their definitions of history and how knowing the history of their towns and cities determines criteria for citizenship. Stack is a storyteller par excellence, so that as you read the book, you feel as though you are present at the interviews. He notes that he talked to "hundreds of people" (p. 16), including young and old, rich and poor, educated and uneducated, weekenders and townspeople, schoolteachers, politicians, and academics. He really evokes the personalities of the people and their eccentricities in ways that make the book more readable to laypersons and academics alike. The use of quotes helps to emphasize statements and findings, which adds validity to the study. Pictures of people and places also add to the feeling of being present in the research.

Stack utilizes history to examine a specific impact of knowing history, and that is the social construction of good or bad citizenship. Not many previous books have connected history and citizenship, which makes Stack's book a necessary addition to the anthropological study of people's perceptions of their connection to a specific place and culture. He defines good or eminent citizens as "people who have acquired certain presence and standing in public life, a voice or authority in the town's affairs" (p. 18). Stack also examines the influence of culture on definitions of history and citizenship. One instance that I found particularly important was

Stack's interviews with migrants in California who were from the small towns in Mexico where he conducted research. These interviews demonstrated how rooting, which refers to identifying with an area, town, or nation, is a critical element in understanding how history influences notions of being good citizens of the towns and cities. Many immigrants identify with their hometowns or cities rather than with the nation of Mexico, with the history of towns and cities being more important than national history to definitions of themselves as citizens of particular places.

Overall, Stack covers a lot on the influence of history on definitions of citizenship. He demonstrates how people decide which history holds importance for them and how they see themselves as citizens and define others as fellow citizens or outsiders. Sharing a history, whether written or oral, determines the social construction of in-groups and out-groups. Stack does a wonderful job of describing the processes by which socially constructed categories are created in the minds and lives of everyday people, through the idea of a shared history among people.

In the *History in Mexico: An Ethnography of Citizenship*, Stack begins the discussion on the importance of history and culture for the creation of citizenship by studying the influence of history on determining who is or is not considered by themselves or others as a good or eminent citizen. This book is essential reading for courses in cultural anthropology, sociology, and history. By examining notions of history in the past and present in Mexico, Stack presents a book that emphasizes how history changes across time and place. He stresses how history is reproduced through public debates, and that public debates are the "key to citizenship" (p. 143). He demonstrates the links between history and citizenship, and the need for more research on the topic in other national contexts.

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