

# Urban Modernization and Social Change in Mexico during the Porfiriato

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**Abstract:** *The Porfiriato era in Mexico (1876–1911) marked an unprecedented transformation in urban life, driven by industrialization, foreign investment, and modern infrastructure. This period witnessed the proliferation of railroads, electric lighting, telecommunication systems, and public entertainment venues, significantly altering daily life in major cities. However, these advancements also deepened social inequalities, as the lower class remained marginalized while the elite enjoyed luxuries comparable to those in European capitals. This short communication explores the impact of modernization on Mexican society during the Porfiriato, highlighting both its technological progress and social stratification.*

**Keywords:** Porfiriato, urban modernization, industrialization, Mexican history, social transformation

Daily life in the cities of Mexico during the Porfiriato constitutes the most impressive of all periods of national history, due to its spectacular transformations. The inhabitants of large cities, such as Mexico City and Guadalajara, were witnesses and users of previously unimaginable comforts. The dirt in the streets was covered by tiles that allowed people to walk without having to walk through puddles or sink their shoes in the mud. In addition, it was possible to receive water in the houses through pipes and the streets were filled with electrified poles, whose reflections could be seen as far as the eye could see during moonless nights. This study aims to examine the socio-economic and infrastructural changes in urban Mexico during the Porfiriato period, analyzing the impact of modernization on daily life and class structures.

Department stores and evening entertainment venues proliferated across Mexico. The language evolved to accommodate new inventions, services, and shifting societal attitudes. New gadgets, jobs and activities needed new regulations; laws, then, were also transformed to be updated, to modernize along with the daily life that transited throughout the country with vertiginous steps. The liberal economic reforms encouraged foreign investment by offering favorable conditions to investors. Industry and the means of transportation to move its products and raw materials underwent a spectacular development between 1896 and 1919. Cities were linked by railroads, roads and highways that shortened distances and brought communities and people together.

The rapid economic growth reshaped daily life as cities modernized, which enjoyed the services of the telegraph, post office, tramway, public lighting, hydraulic and electrical systems, cinemas, theaters, restaurants, bars and hotels with telephones, household appliances and automobiles to offer services and attention to the new clients, eager to consume the pleasures of modern life. Society became polarized towards two extremes: a small upper class and a huge lower class, both between a huge distance in which a middle class was barely perceptible. Twenty-five percent of the national population was concentrated in the cities and for this reduced number, the magnificent transformations of modern life modified

activities that quickly became habits, both at work and in leisure or in the very routes within and between cities.

The daily life of comfort, entertainment, travel and luxury was reserved for a small portion of the well-established society of rich Mexicans and foreigners. The great exploited masses observed, when there was time between their endless chores, how this small enriched group always lived with all the luxuries that technology was creating and caprice imposing. Daily life in Mexico City did not differ much from that of other great capitals, such as Paris or St. Petersburg. Leisure became an essential part of daily life for all economic strata of society. The rich traveled to other cities, attended the theater, the circus and literary evenings during the week; they played polo, tennis and cricket; they practiced skating and shooting or attended baseball games.

The poor had Sunday as a rest day, since most of the day laborers had that day off and used it, most of the time, for strolling; the cities began to fill up with squares and gardens, with new buildings. The kiosks in the gardens and squares were filled with music, acrobatic and puppet shows, where there was no shortage of vendimias, food, toys, games of skill and chance that everyone, rich and poor, could afford. There were also kermes on civic dates and fairs with little trains, horses, saddled sheep and donkeys with padded saddles.

Sundays were also the days when bullfights, cockfights and circus, cinema, theater and variety shows were organized; horse, bicycle and automobile races. It was a day of celebration, fun, eating, drinking, playing and joy. For those who worked in haciendas, the bosses organized the mass and the party right there. The rich left aside the local cuisine in the new Frenchified restaurants and hotels where they consumed omelettes, crepes, eggs in cocotte, meat, chicken or fish covered with thick sauces and butter; all accompanied by bread. The popular class consumed enfrijoladas, enchiladas, broths, sauces and moles. The French taste of President Porfirio Díaz was also reflected in the dress, where upper class women enjoyed a variety of fabrics such as velvets, silks, satins, brocades and lace; accompanied by parasols, hats, gloves and luxurious jewelry. The women of the village wore cotton or wool petticoats and wore huipiles, chokers, silver rings, coral gourd earrings and the rebozo.

During the Porfiriato, daily life was filled with social problems, such as criminality and prostitution; there was an increase in crimes of various kinds, from simple robberies to homicides, which not only affected the most economically privileged sector of society, but also other strata, such as artisans, merchants, students and housewives, from which arose the establishment of the penitentiary regime, replacing the public jail. Parallel to criminality, prostitution was a social and cultural phenomenon that had an impact on health to the point of elaborating regulations for women and public houses, in order to avoid the spread of venereal diseases among the youth.

In France, everyday life, imposed by the new circumstances arising from this industrial modernity, was described in the novels of Zola and the first novels of Marcel Proust; while in the East, in Russia, Leo Tolstoy was still alive and writing. In Mexico, new genres were developed, such as the chronicle in journalism and serialized literature - the so - called string literature -; the essay and historiography that not only reached the classrooms and desks of the academic and specialized public, but also the homes of the population who could not pass through this new life indifferently.

The enormous transformations during the Porfiriato not only modified the urban and rural landscape, but also the way of seeing, perceiving and thinking of the citizens. Thus, new ways of recording, measuring, relating, teaching and transmitting these thoughts began to emerge. Scientific and technological advances led to radical changes in the teaching and learning of knowledge; thus, a new educational interest based on scientism emerged. There are two fields where this new eagerness is manifested: the very measurement of subjects and the culture of the written word.

The enlightened and urbanizing project of this period was a success, since this new policy of consolidating the nation on the basis of a secular and universal education that would reach the entire population brought, at the same time, the idea of supporting art and culture from Mexico City as a republic of letters that stipulated the province not to invest in higher education, but to send its best students to receive the best professional training. This civilizing eagerness led to the founding of a national university, which in turn transformed the daily lives of students, families with a view to personal improvement and young people excited about this new entry into the world of specialization, development and satisfaction.

As a result, poetry is written and read in any public event, civil poetry recitations on demand proliferate; people learn to include poetry in everyday life. The Porfiriato is full of clean air that makes all men equal, in thought and scientific ideals and at the same time, puts Mexico on the same level as the rest of the modern world. The artistic communities were concerned and occupied with having their own Mexican music; and the literati, historians and scientists did the same. This builds a consensus among all the protagonists, but delimits them from the rest of the population, which remains self - absorbed in the daily work.

## Revised Conclusion

The Porfiriato period profoundly reshaped urban Mexico, introducing modern amenities and altering social dynamics. While infrastructure and technology flourished, class disparities widened, creating a polarized society. The legacy of this era persists in Mexico's urban landscape, influencing contemporary socio - economic structures. This short communication highlights the duality of progress and inequality during a crucial phase of Mexico's modernization.

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