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From Developmentalism to Neoliberalism:
Beach Tourism, Cancún, and the Mexican State

Abstract

For Latin America in general and Mexico in particular, the 1980s represented an unprecedented era of economic precarity. When the Mexican president Miguel de la Madrid assumed office in 1982, he therefore promised to revitalize Mexico's flagging financial circuits. Central to that endeavor was none other than his Secretary of Tourism, Antonio Enríquez Savignac, a Harvard-trained Mexican economist widely credited with creating the contemporary resort town of Cancún. Although de la Madrid and Savignac proclaimed a "revolution in tourism" in response to Mexico's complex economic crises of the 1980s, their unilateral prescription helped usher in Mexico's current neoliberal model as state-led development gave way to state-led privatization. Taking Cancún as a point of departure, this paper examines the shifting meanings of "tourism" in Mexico against the broader backdrop of Latin America's "lost decade." It begins with a brief discussion of pre-1980s Cancún, before focusing on Cancún's transformational role in Mexico's "tourism revolution" of the 1980s and its social consequences for the 1990s and early 2000s. The paper concludes by reflecting on what historians of the Global South can learn from placing the historiographies of tourism, development, and the state in conversation.