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Making Millennials The Heroes of the Earthquake

It's true: when we all tried to go straight home to make sure our loved ones were safe, we were surprised at the number of cars stopping along the way to offer a ride to people stuck on the street desperately waiting for a bus or taxi to take them where they needed to go. You could see cars packed like sardines in a can heading toward big avenues, subway stations, *metro-bus* stations, and main thoroughfares, when in normal, everyday life, nobody would dare do that —“How can you invite a group of strangers into your car, with things as they are...?” Men and women of all ages were standing in the middle of

intersections with broken stoplights directing traffic; people were blocking streets that had collapsed buildings with their cars to divert traffic and facilitate rescue efforts.

By 5 in the afternoon on that September 19, when I got to my home in the Narvarte neighborhood, the stream of young men and women going by was noticeable; they were hurrying toward the collapsed buildings armed only with surgical masks on their faces. Little mom-and-pop stores were besieged by customers buying gallons of water to take to the rescue areas. Hand-written signs reading “You can charge your phone here,” “Free toilet,” or “Earthquake donation collection point” were seen on the doors and walls of endless numbers of apartments, houses, and

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businesses. Everywhere you heard “we need buckets, helmets, pick-axes, shovels, flashlights, batteries” to support the anonymous rescue workers who, having seen how the buildings where they themselves lived or worked, or where their neighbors or complete strangers lived, ran to dig into the rocks to get people out alive who had been trapped in the rubble. Desperation, fear, and hope permeated the air.

Little by little, night fell, and with it came a sharpening sense of uncertainty. Intermittent electricity and Internet access made it impossible to be up on what was happening in real time in the rest of the city; plus, they made it difficult to be in better contact with friends and acquaintances. “All that technology, and we end up here, scared to death, with a candle and a battery-run radio,” a friend would write on his Facebook page.

In the darkness you could see the lights on the bicycles moving from one place to another carrying materials and tools. The quiet magnified the sounds of motorcycles and ambulance, fire-truck, and police car sirens, and at the same time forced us to look at ourselves as we hadn’t for a very long time, to listen to each other, to hold each other, to share the sensation of finiteness. “And the police? And traffic cops? And security? And the official rescue teams? And timely, truthful news?” I asked myself through the hours, with no answer.

The next day, when some homes had electricity and Internet, what the day before was uncertainty now became an uncontrollable flood of information, much of it of doubtful origin and veracity. Individual or joint action by strangers taken in the first moments after the earthquake turned little by little into more organized activities by family members, friends, and contacts. The rescue brigades were better equipped; cars, pick-ups, and trucks with the sign “Support Vehicle” were adapted to transport rescue workers from one collapsed building to another, together with the food and tools needed, moving through the streets disregarding one-way signs, speed limits, or

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lanes reserved for other uses. Hundreds, thousands of food and tool collection stations were set up first, followed later by the collection of clothing and cleaning materials for earthquake victims. At supermarkets and little stores you could see dozens of families buying food to make traditional *torta* sandwiches on rolls, regular sandwiches, *chilaquiles*, rice pudding, bread, and coffee to feed rescue workers.

Everyone, men and women, dug deep for the best of themselves to offer support in whatever way was needed: restaurants closed their doors to customers to prepare food and distribute it to the rescue areas; hardware stores distributed their entire stock; bakeries donated rolls. I saw such unexpected sights as a children’s party venue turned into a collection center and shelter for earthquake victims; a van with a sign in the window that read, “I’m a psychologist. Speak to me if you need me”; and, a group of little boys and girls actually playing soccer in the middle of the street! A state of emergency, with all the good and the bad that that means.

However, it seemed that everything you could do wasn’t enough to solve the pressing need of the moment: getting those who had been buried under the rubble out alive. This created a feeling of anxiety and anguish unknown to those who had not experienced the 1985 earthquake. What we had now was the unending flow of tweets, Facebook posts, WhatsApp messages, phone calls, and emails with messages like “On such and such a street ... they need flashlights, batteries, first-aid supplies, water,” “At the corner of street X and avenue Y they need doctors to tend to people rescued,” “Urgent: on another corner a building with people inside just collapsed.” Many of these messages were fake, their source unclear, and impossible to corroborate, combined with the story about the non-existent little girl named “Frida Sofía,” allegedly trapped in the rubble of a primary school. They inundated our hours after the earthquake, preventing us from recovering our equanimity.

With the passing days, these volunteer activities, crude in technique and very useful in practice, became more and more expert. While initially civil society took the reins of the emergency, with the passing hours, other actors became visible who would have to be taken into consideration in the task of understanding the tensions and contradictions that any social phenomenon implies: that is to say, the dichotomy of “good, organized civil society

vs. bad, incapable state and authorities” is insufficient to explain the image of a soldier breaking down in tears over finding the lifeless body of a little girl.

Also, this dichotomy makes the role of the media—particularly Televisa, central to the story of “Frida Sofía—” invisible, as well as the possible break inside the elites with regard to the case of the collapse of the Enrique Rébsamen School. It also completely erases the centrality and responsibility of the real estate market in the tragedy.

Amidst this exaltation of civil society, the media constructed an idea that would become a cliché: that young people were the main protagonists of the rescue efforts. “Hidden Away from TV, but Once Again in the Front Lines of Solidarity,” journalist Blanche Petrich would write;¹ “those same young people of the #YoSoy132 movement and social media activism,” as writer Rossana Reguillo has characterized them; all the way to the oft-repeated statement about “the Millennials who saved Mexico.” If not queried, this description could lead us to a series of imprecise ideas that are relatively unhelpful for constructing knowledge. The term “young Millennials” understood in the abstract makes it impossible to comprehend that

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the young mechanic who works on the street of the Portales Neighborhood and who headed up the rescue of people trapped under the rubble was not, is not, and never will be a social media activist or a Millennial. Nevertheless, he put his body and his entire life in danger in order to save his trapped neighbors. And this idea also does not help us understand what a group of young people were doing at the front lines of a rescue effort, dressed with helmets, surgical masks, and vests, taking a selfie in front of a collapsed building.

With this, I mean to say that we run the risk of conceiving of young people as a homogeneous category that has gone from being scorned as a useless, selfish generation to being made into heroes after a gesture of momentary solidarity. This is why I ask myself where this



Ginnette Riquelme/Reuters

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construction came from and who this discourse is useful to. Who are these young people who did, in effect, flood the streets of our city for a few days? What are their ethical, moral reference points? How are those different from the reference points of other young people of the same age who didn't participate at all in these tasks or who, on the contrary, could be found at the other end of the spectrum in absolute indifference or even looting?

If we take on board the idea that the protagonists of the rescue are the same people who headed up the #Yo-Soy132 movement or the protests against the forced disappearance of the 43 young Ayotzinapa normal school students,² then it is possible to identify certain traits in their political and social activities that distinguish them from previous generations: that is, they are university students, which means they have a relatively high economic, political, social, and cultural capital that separates them from the vast majority of the population. What I notice about them is that their strength is not in their bodies, in the solidity of their arguments, or their performance on the street, but in their expert knowledge about digital social networks. The latter is what led them to operate the Verificado19s digital platform to test out and organize information and make rescue efforts efficient in the face of a lack of official information, as the Artículo 19 civil society organization has documented. It is also true that they have access to certain resources that allow them to act on a different level than how those with access to more old-fashioned resources or from popular sectors could act; that is, they have cars, Internet-capable cell phones, computers, ipads, equipment for taking photographs, audio, and video, and access to specialized computer programs. I repeat: none of these are accessible to the majority of the population. And I also must say that I notice that they take a great interest in being in the lime-light, a product of the uncritical exaltation of their activity by the media in terms of political confrontation and by academia. These young people have believed this dis-

course, to the point that they take the credit for organizing collection and distribution of food, or the veracity of the tweets. All of this has happened amidst the high intensity of the immediacy of their activities, without any regard for taking on tasks that would have more far-reaching effects, much less for a level of organization that would involve other actors or a profound commitment that would imply more time and actually being in the space of real politics.

In the end, this exaltation of youth and civil society is kept up based on the initial absence and the later ineffectiveness of the federal, local, and borough authorities in the rescue efforts, in emitting trustworthy, timely information, and in solving the enormous problem the tragedy represents. All this has fed a feeling of self-sufficiency combined with the most absolute mistrust in the authorities, which in the long run may well sharpen the already dying relationship between the governing and the governed.

We must realize that the support, which lasted no longer than the week after the earthquake, is not enough to accompany the hundreds of people who lost all their belongings, and that we cannot resolve the long process of reconstruction that is coming by ourselves.

In whose hands and using what model is the city going to be reconstructed? Why do we continue to not have trustworthy, opportune information? Why at this point has no responsibility for the tragedy been assigned to authorities and businesspersons? Who will punish them and impart justice to the victims? What will the role of the real estate market be in this? What role will our university play in this process?

These are questions that we must seriously ask ourselves in order to deconstruct false dichotomies, avoid clichés, and completely seriously and with analytical depth construct the knowledge the nation demands of us so as to be able to fulfill the ethical and moral commitment that we have as university researchers. ■■■

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Notes

¹ Blanche Petrich, "Ocultada por la TV, pero de nuevo en primera fila de solidaridad," *La Jornada*, September 20, 2017, <http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2017/09/20/politica/008n2pol>. [Editor's Note.]

² About these two movements, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yo_Soy_132 and https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2014_Iguala_mass_kidnapping, respectively. [Editor's Note.]