

POLITICAL CULTURE IN MEXICO

Paradoxes at the End of the Century

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It is both true and useless to say that the beginning and the end of cultural phenomena are impossible to pinpoint. The term “process” grants a certain license, offering a broad and suitable margin which allows for referring to these rhythms and long-term processes where so many variables interact that they become unmanageable. How can we blame scholars for surprises when the whole social panorama escapes human possibilities?

This thinking leads to a destination where everything becomes relative. Is Mexico a fully democratic country? The answer is no. But is it becoming democratic? Yes. However, it still has an authoritarian culture. Of course. Nonetheless, another modern and bold Mexico also exists. Yes. And corporativism is still very strong. This is equally true.

The premise of the most serious, rich and suggestive version of this approach is to divide Mexico into many Mexicos and, therefore, reformulate questions into a thousand others. Which Mexico are we referring to? That of the North, the South, the urban, rural, educated, or illiterate Mexico, the one of young people, or that of women. I would like to make it clear that I consider this fragmenting answer from scholars and professionals a more responsible one. It marks great progress for several reasons. First, because statistics have been included in the analysis of Mexican political culture. Second, because once and for all, it puts an end to the unitary version of the country that enabled demagogues and pre-

tenders to talk about Mexico in the singular and use it for their own purposes. Statistics compel us to talk about several Mexicos, and this implies recognizing plurality.

It will definitely take decades to leave behind literary and prescientific approaches and ensure that statistics are present in Mexican social sciences. This is not a simple epistemological or methodological problem, but a matter of altering political and academic interest groups. According to Thomas Khun, the orientation of relevant centers of learning will have to change. My concern is now different. Just as the unitary interpretation of Mexico was fallacious and deceitful, at this stage of the discussion the country's major cultural traits, derived from figures, are a sea of partial truths that make everything relative. In this sense, I think it worthwhile to review authoritarian sources of thought and contrast them with those of democratic thought. While partial truths may be exact, certain common characteristics produce a different global understanding. Like all generalizations, these face the risk of being inexact or unfair. However, without generalizing it would be impossible to identify the exact location where the process is taking place. Any diachronic reading in which the main latitude is time demands the definition of the complementary parameter. The central objective would be to determine what specific conditions have favored or inhibited democratic culture.

Civilization is one of the concepts that generate great uneasiness in Mexico's political and academic milieus. For some, it threatens the discourse of nation-

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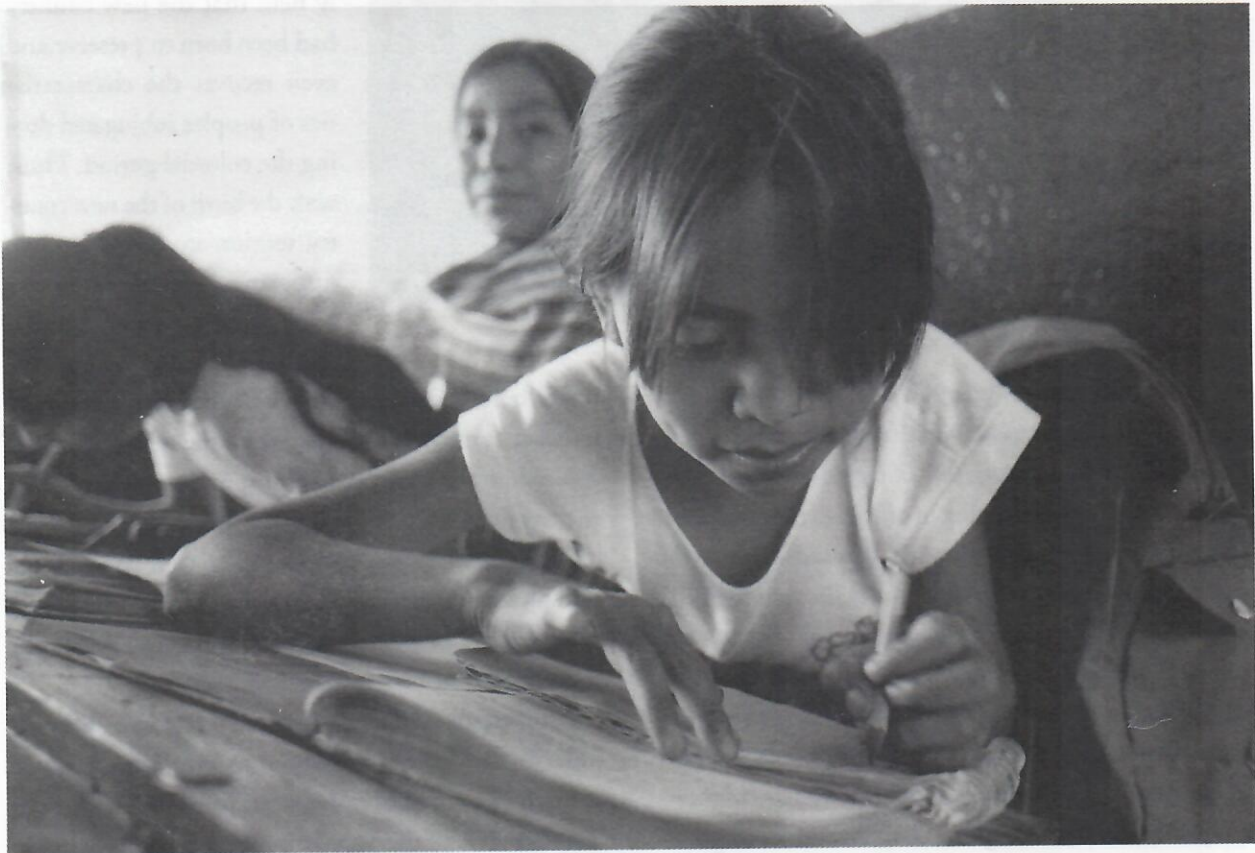
al sovereignty and leads to accepting the unfailing presence of the United States in the Americas. For others, the Eurocentric implications of the concept obliterate the idea of difference as a value in itself.

But then, what can be done? Maybe we should discard this term as inconvenient and impractical for the Mexican case. Should we simply stop talking about civilizing processes and agents? I think that would be a serious mistake. The definitions of civilization are countless. Many of them are validated by such respected authors as Michelet, Tönies, Alfred Weber, Toynbee, Levy-Strauss or Norbert Elias. I will use here, the one that seems less conflictive for the Mexican case. Braudel says that "civilizations are spaces." Hence the question: To which civilizing space do we belong? For several decades the argument has turned around our cultural proximity to Latin American countries, our belonging to that continental, indigenous and Spanish secondary world that denies the Anglo Saxon through its values.

However, the facts do not support these assertions. In 1990 the U.S.-Mexico border was crossed almost 300 million times. This figure increases geometrically during periods of economic growth in both countries. It took the whole decade of the 1930s for there to be more than 200 million crossings. Today what once happened in one year takes place in only one month. What has happened to anti-Yankee feeling if all public opinion polls indicate that the most admired country in Mexico is the United States, with Japan lagging behind as a distant second? Neither facts nor feelings show that Mexico is looking southward. Furthermore, there is room for the painful question of whether Latin America constitutes a civilization in the full sense of the term. Late in the twentieth century, while relations with the East show great potential, at best they represent wishes, if not wishful thinking.

Many of the civilizing agents presently at work in Mexico come from the West. They have an impact

Imaginatina-Angel Torres



Educational reform, the key to democratization.

on a society that is totally different from the one which decades ago declared itself Latin American. Ninety-five percent of the population has electricity. Radio broadcasting covers almost 90% of Mexican territory. Around 75% of families owns a radio. Television reaches nearly 70% of the country although there are fewer television sets than radios. In Mexico urbanization is still very rapid: already 70% of the population is urban and only 30% is rural.

There is a direct correlation among urbanization, information, participation and electoral fairness. The main problems arise in rural, isolated areas. Electoral

pare itself with what is happening in the rest of the world. The strains of modernization are evident.

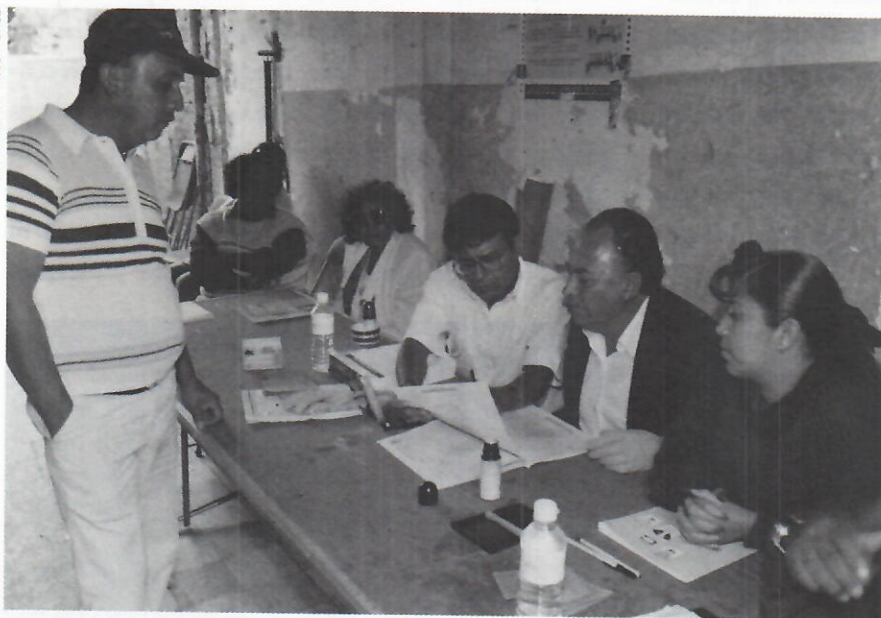
However, the road is not totally straight and paved. The very origins of the country's national integration still show problems. The founding myth of the Mexican state planted the seeds of authoritarianism and intolerance for which we are now paying a high price. In other words, the creole, independentist discourse based the idea of a new nation on the meeting of two cultures, two bloods, two races: the overwhelming indigenous majority and a very small minority of Spanish creoles. It was assumed that the new

nation would find in *mestizaje* [the mixture of the races] both its origin and destiny, its rationale. *Mestizaje* was authentically interpreted as a new form of integration between ethnic and population issues. Nonetheless, it was simultaneously held that the new country had been born to preserve and even recover the characteristics of peoples subjugated during the colonial period. Thus, with the birth of the new country, tension arose between two opposing poles. Mexico was born to be different; Mexico was born to be the same as centuries

before. In contrast with what had happened in other countries, the strength of the new social pact focused on the recovery of ethnic and racial aboriginal entities or in the emergence of a new race. The underlying normative, institutional pact sank the federation and incipient individual rights beneath the notion of otherness, of the entelechy of what was Mexican, the origin that was justified in itself.

After more than a century and a half it is still possible to divide the country into two large groups: mestizo Mexico, and indigenous Mexico. The former includes 90% of the population, and is basically incorporated into the same economic, language and edu-

Cuartoscuro - José Nuñez



Mexico's citizens now participate more actively in politics.

trends already show signs of a Mexican mainstream and indicate the disappearance from the scene of radical positions. In almost 70% of electoral districts the contest is real and alternating in office is a tangible possibility. The trend is increasing. In this sense, it may be said that the country is heading—whether it is the PRI's intent or not—toward a democracy that follows the rules of Western democracies. While it is true that during the last decade Latin America has become increasingly democratic, at least formally, it would be hard to say that Mexico's democratic process has originated specifically in the region. Globalization and growing trade have forced Mexico to systematically com-

cational networks as the rest of the country. Indigenous Mexico, 10% of the population, scattered among multiple ethnic groups that speak more than 56 different languages, is simply a separate world with many secondary worlds. The nation as such is fractured. This phenomenon is certainly the result of economic marginalization. But there is also certain self-segregation, a separateness that not even economic integration can overcome. The desire to belong to the Mexican mestizo nation can be a false premise. The founding myth assumed that Mexico crossed the indigenous skies and not the other way around. Different world views are not an obstacle to sharing the same category: They represent the miserable among the miserable. But let's now go back to the underlying cultural aspect.

In his brilliant essay "The Hedgehog and the Fox," Isaiah Berlin sets forth two kinds of thought: that of hedgehogs who know only one truth, however big, and that of foxes, who admit multiple small truths. Hedgehogs do not accept the coexistence of truths and are, therefore, sources of cruel intolerance. Foxes, humbler creatures, skip from one truth to another. The hedgehogs' and foxes' ways of thinking go hand in hand in different countries. Foxes represent the Renaissance thought that allows human beings to explore their own truths. Hedgehog thought of the religious and all-inclusive kind rejects the coexistence of worldviews. Fox thought is liberal, and through the doorway of freedom of belief and expression, forces the acceptance of difference. Hedgehogs represent dogmatic thought based on a large source of unique inspiration, whether a duty, a cultural tradition or a millenarist or racial conviction.

In Mexico, foxes and hedgehogs fight openly. Proto-nationalism based on the purity of the aboriginal became, as always, exclusionary and short-sighted nationalism. Mexicanness —whatever that means— was the incomparable essence of a morally superior people that, as Edmundo O'Gorman once said, made Mexicans different, *sui generis*, special. "There is no

place like Mexico," says the proverb. The nationalism that for decades continued invoking the remote indigenous past as origin and destiny flowed through two inexorable streams of intolerance: the belief in original purity and the idea of a foremost national unity. The problem is that these concepts are mutually exclusive. Either Mexico institutionally agreed to overcome the indigenous world, or an attempt was made to perpetuate the alleged original purity. The belief in purity led to a kind of intoxication with the past. If our only reason for existing as a nation lies in our origins, the past must be turned into a huge totem to which endless tribute should be rendered. The present, and particularly the future, are thus considered mere accidents on a national journey that had, and will always have, its better days in the past. Furthermore, this search for the origin weakened and is still weakening the national pact. If origin is des-

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tinuity, any reformulation is a betrayal. The consequences of this discourse are seen at quite different levels. For instance, if the past is by definition glorious, the community, a legendary form of organization, must be equally so. Hence, not only certain representatives of the Zapatista Army, but quite prominent intellectuals or rulers during the late twentieth century sympathize with the idea of implementing or reinstating in certain areas of the country hands-up voting, which, although an old tradition, violates secrecy and minimal respect for republican forms.

From that perspective, the country's history has been a succession of betrayals of the indigenous world. During a visit to Mexico, the king of Spain met a group of indigenous people who were demanding the right to exercise their property titles over lands granted during the colonial period. Mexico had taken them

away. The idea of preserving indigenous purity and placing community traditions above individual rights, plus the justification of authoritarian measures for the preservation of national unity, has been a terrifying cultural mix.

The different sources of authoritarian hedgehog thought still alive in Mexico are countless. The long-standing hegemony of the Catholic Church propitiated intolerance. Today communities divide and indigenous people kill each other because of differences in beliefs, or sometimes simply over ways of expressing the same belief. Intolerance is alive. It would be useless to say that the lack of religious plurality gave way to intolerance. Mexican corporativism, that for decades buttressed the party in government, is seen as different states within the state. Political life in certain societies and labor unions is sometimes reminiscent of medieval guilds. Agrarian and worker control systems do exist, and represent sources of authoritarian thought where individual rights of free expression of ideas are subject to the political interests of guilds and unions.

The *Pax priista* inhibited fundamental political rights and the country is now paying the consequences of that political culture. The preeminence of a political party in the national arena, the enduring weakness and corruption of other irrelevant political actors terribly undermined the image of political parties as such. According to the World Value Survey of the University of Michigan, around 70% of the population distrusts political parties. Governmental institutions, the judiciary and the legislature, the civil service and the police are not seen as trustworthy. This propitiates volatility in public opinion.

Without exaggeration, it can be said that scientific thought as such has not yet taken root in the country. A recent study¹ shows how 50% of the urban population still accounts for life events as a result of luck. A society with low educational levels and as yet unconsolidated political institutions necessarily speculates. That is our case. How far is Mexico from reach-

¹ Mónica Sáenz, "Zedillo y la brujas: magia y legitimidad," *Este País*, No. 60, March 1996.

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ing the other river bank? How can we make sure that the political culture of Mexicans is definitely democratic? It is hard to tell.

Two extremely important factors affect millions of Mexicans every day. First, the educational system: Mexico must increase the country's general schooling level to 12 years if it wants to contend with the rest of the world. A better educated Mexico will be more democratic. Take for example the recent local elections. Another important factor for transition is the media. Despite their many limitations, television and radio offer information of all kinds to millions of Mexicans, thus modifying their world views. Although there are no recent studies about the type of values transmitted by the educational system or the media, their indirect impact is certainly felt in the behavior of citizens.

Foxes or hedgehogs, democratic or authoritarian. How easy it would be to imprison some and free others! The problem is that, as pure categories, they only exist in our imagination. In their daily lives, millions of Mexicans tread the winding road of industrialization, of urbanization, and are bombarded daily by the interests of their communities, their *ejidos*, their labor unions, their churches, their parties, their neighborhoods; they are bombarded by morning news programs, by commercial spots for international firms. They live their days in the company of the "nomadic objects" that Italo Calvino once talked about. For some, change is too slow. For others, it is too abrupt. When did it start and when will it end? Who can set the dates? What is undeniable is that the process is underway. 