

# Will Mexican Society Modernize? Political and Social Rationales

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**M**odernization in Mexico can be analyzed using a central category: social differentiation. The concept of differentiation allows us to maintain a more neutral perspective about modernization, less charged with value judgements. However, in and of itself, the notion is insufficient to reconstruct what we might call the “syntax” of the Mexican social system or the modernizing moment. It is therefore necessary to introduce other elements into the discussion which should be made clear in the course of the exposition. Institutionalization is one of these central items. By institutionalization I mean —and here I recall Huntington— the process whereby organizations and procedures achieve value and stability. I want to refer briefly to three dimensions in which clear processes of differentiation can be discerned in Mexican society, although not without their contradictions: a) in the state sphere; b) in the political system; c) in what I will generically call the dimension of the state-nation-society. The ideas expressed hereafter must be understood as a series of hypotheses.

## THE STATE SPHERE

Schematically, we can say that the reform of the state is above all a different way of ordering the relations among the state, the economy and politics. This is why it presupposes a new form of social coordination and integration. One of the central features of this new mode is that it allows for and fosters greater operational differentiation between the economic and political sys-

tems. That is, it encourages autonomous rules of operation for each system. No one can help but notice that this requirement changes one of the traditional tasks politically, socially and culturally assigned to the state by Mexican postrevolutionary society: giving coherence and unity to the dynamics whereby the economic and political systems operated. The possibility of firmly maintaining the enormous direct influence of the state and the political system on the economy was seen as the central means for reducing social risk and crystallizing “the historic interests of the nation.” A society whose administrative, political and economic systems were little differentiated was the key for maintaining an extremely high degree of penetration and control over the social sphere as a whole and therefore for graduating the levels of complexity of society itself.

The reform of the state, although still unfinished and partial, is a means for shifting the traditional function of the postrevolutionary state. The decline of the state as the driving force behind economic activity and the sole agent for social compensation introduces three related problems: a) coordination between the economy and the political system, since the processes of differentiation give rise to a situation wherein the functions of distribution and generalized construction of consensuses cannot be carried out on the basis of the weight of the state alone; b) a different role for the political system and its influence on social demand; and c) the efficiency of the process of socialization of new rules for actors. The resolution of these three facets of the situation has been very contradictory, despite undoubted steps forward, and is not yet a sufficiently solid foundation.

With regard to the coordination of the economy and politics, two things are needed, the links and coherence of which

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are difficult to achieve: administrative-decisional efficiency and political democratization. In addition to administrative and financial rationalization, efficiency is crucial because it has an impact on the behavior of actors and the status of the norm. In postrevolutionary Mexico, "influence" became the fundamental axis of social coordination to the extent that it guaranteed a specific link (of a corporatist nature) between authorities and social actors. In today's conditions, the reform of the state basically requires administrative efficiency.

In the new conditions, the political system can be neither a state controlled entity nor a means for "tying together" organizations and the state. In fact, the new regulation of the economy can only fully develop in the framework of the differentiation of the state and the political system. This separation is part of the new role of politics. In the postrevolutionary model, influence and the political nature of demand were not only two factors of coordination, but determining reference points for the behavior of agents. The possibility of turning a political demand into social demand was determined by the high degree of [state] intervention. In this dynamic, technical, economic and normative aspects were subordinate and politics became highly distributive. Representation and distribution appeared as one. This politization of the market established parameters for making social calculations that, in principle, are changing today, or are in contradiction with the rationality of the reform of the state. In its social dimension, that reform fosters less tutelage on the part of the state.

Not a few agents have been disarmed by this change in the role of politics and its effects on the system of social coordination, finding themselves confronted with a break-up of institutional contexts that generates ambiguous dynamics which simultaneously modernize and reaffirm traditional practices. This ambiguity increases due to the absence of a new institutional framework that jibes with the modeling of the reform of the state. This is an obstacle to the process of political and normative socialization.

There are at least two moments in which the institutional framework breaks down: democracy and the rule of law. Both are central for coordination, but they are also part of the context needed in order for the state to become professional in the framework of a process of social differentiation. The rule of law is inconceivable, particularly in Mexico, without a sharp process of differentiation among the branches of government. A society

centralized by the state and therefore with a low degree of differentiation generates an institutional framework in which the operational codes of the systems overlap, and consequently, influence overrides almost everything else as the regulatory code par excellence. This inhibits the play of the agents.

In this way, the absence of an institutional framework is added to the lack of both political secularization and the assimilation of new rules. Both elements are counterposed to the dynamics of differentiation. The weak links among the institutional framework, systems for action and differentiation introduce oblique and contradictory lines of thought between two poles: governability and innovation, that is, between the continued existence of and the transition from postrevolutionary society.

#### THE POLITICAL SYSTEM

Processes of social differentiation are also discernable in the political system. The political system may be generically understood as the formal and informal rules that regulate the distribution of power, the construction of authority and the distribution of values. It is made up of three basic elements: the political community, the regimen and forms of authority. The political community is made up of people, groups and institutions which can have an impact on the political system and decision-making. Structures for processing demands—without official standing, unlike political parties—may emerge within the political community. Political communities hold dominant



The establishment of the Federal Electoral Institute in 1990 is one indicator of Mexico's political modernization.

or competing ideologies, values or beliefs. The regimen is made up of ideologies, norms or rules of the game and decision-making bodies or authorities. "Forms of authority" refers to the mode of constituting (legitimizing) and carrying out roles.

While it has been put forward with other perspectives in mind, the demand for democracy in Mexico has basically been channeled into achieving full rational institutionalization of the electoral sphere and function. This dynamic is related to other dimensions and has had an impact in a variety of areas, but particularly in the levels of differentiation among the state, the political system, regimen and political community characteristic of postrevolutionary Mexico. To illustrate this process I will make the following specific observations.

The political community has expanded and diversified. Given the centrality of the state, the political community had three basic characteristics: a) it was highly concentrated ideologically with horizons determined by revolutionary nationalism and those in office at any given moment. This could be seen in the weakness of public opinion and political alternatives, but also in the enormous coherence between the political community's values and those of the regimen. This ideological concentration was, undoubtedly, a factor which contributed to discipline and legitimacy; b) there was a relative plurality of groups, but they were absolutely invisible publicly. The large number of groups (unions, peasants, administrators, communications experts, etc.) was in effect a functional requirement and did not constitute an open market in the political sense; c) the political community depended on the will of the state

and consequently was not functionally differentiated from it nor from the regimen. It had a pale autonomy in the programmatic sphere and in its expression and discourse. Today, by contrast, the community has expanded and gained a not inappreciable autonomy with both party and civic structures to shore it up. In fact, today there is not only a greater distance but also less coherence between the values of the regimen and those of the community: there is competition between ideologies. With this has come an enriched discourse, the construction of leaderships and a break-up of the monopolies of political socialization. The diversification of the community also produces a favorable environment for individual freedom: personal dissidence can now find other roads and modes of participation. Its costs tend to drop.

The political system has also become differentiated: internally in the political community and externally from the state. The classical indicator of that unity was the role of the government party and corporatist dynamics. In principle, the dynamic of the institutionalization of the political-electoral sphere changes the framework for the actors: parties and government are privileged agents. With that, the spectrum of political activity expands to go beyond the corporatist sphere. But, above all, the dynamic of institutionalization strives for a differentiated construction, functionally speaking, of the party system: the degree of consolidation of this system is a clear indicator of the degree of differentiation of the political system and, of course, of the separation of the state and the government party. Naturally, the establishment of the full rule of law, with its normative aspects and full separation and balance of powers once again presents itself as an input and a context for moving forward in this differentiation. But there is also another indicator of differentiation: the concentration on the electoral plane, and its very centrality (because of its democratizing effects or due to the imperative of consolidating the parties) produces a strong self-referencing logic in the party system itself, in the electoral system as such.

Internally, the dynamic of institutionalization of the political-electoral sphere also introduces some differentiations: the establishment of structures specialized in electoral regulation (the Federal Electoral Institute). This process of specialization structurally fosters the full use of all procedures and making the law into positive law (specifically writing rules into law). These two elements are part of the very fiber of the dynamic of insti-



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tutionalization and have several implications. First of all, they introduce the perspective of the law as a regulatory and not only a prescriptive factor. In the second place, they introduce a socially irradiated urgency for authority to be exercised according to explicit functions and not preferences or loyalties. In the third place, they have socialized the actors in a game of formulating the rules and agreements that are impossible to fulfill without regulatory techniques. Procedural and normative features have been definitively incorporated to regulate pluralism and guarantee the autonomy of the functioning of structures or systems.

In other words, the rational institutionalization of the political-electoral sphere depends on the differentiation of the political structures and bodies and the inputs of the actors in that process. The diversification and autonomy of the political community, as well as the internal and external differentiation of the political system, with the elements we have pointed out, are two structural variables of the dynamic of modernization. However, the rationales that arise along with it are neither unidirectional nor totally coherent. Undoubtedly, there are rationales of a different order which are obstacles to the dynamic of differentiation.

The close link between the state and the governing party is undoubtedly a limitation for the functional differentiation of society as a whole. The still incomplete autonomy of the judicial branch is another such limitation. The Latin American-type strategies of "overthrowing the regime" have a substantive impact on the different actors' behavior, holding back the country's modernization process. The paradox of the parties being concentrated on the electoral plane with very little exercise of governability encourages differentiation, on the one hand, but on the other, reduces their impact. The non-existent responsibility that the parties show before the public is not a minor matter. The interaction among parties still reproduces today a marked lag between normatively oriented forms of behavior and the rules of the game, understood as non-formalized procedures and practices. In interaction, it is the latter which are very often emphasized. The gap between norms and the rules of the game is particularly grave because there is no correlation between the codes of the two dimensions. This is expressed in permanent tension between public positions and real agreements. The same is true of the public, state sphere, where, as with the elections, we in effect lack an appropriate link between the dynamic of change and institutionalization.

#### THE STATE-NATION-SOCIETY DIMENSION

The discernible processes of differentiation in this sphere should be understood not only as political, but also as cultural since we are confronted here with dynamics that introduce distinctions into the community's and the political culture's frames of reference, as well as into the foundational or legitimizing factors. As is well known, postrevolutionary Mexican society understood the Constitution as a "historical project," since it concretized the meaning of the founding action, the Mexican Revolution. This "historical concretion" generated two pillars of support, one ideological (revolutionary nationalism) and the other political (the social pact). In this way, a high degree of coherence was achieved between the plane of social organization, community values and the regimen. And for that reason, a unifying, transmitting link was also established between organizations-executive-state and the nation itself.

This political and symbolic merger of bodies had at least two results that should be pointed out. The national project was understood at one and the same time as both a historical horizon and as the key for maintaining the state and the nation undifferentiated. The entire nation fit within the confines of social organization and, therefore, of the state; but, at the same time, the meaning of what was national was pointed to as the central criterium for regulating and channeling public affairs. This merger set the limits on the kind of political orientations and practices considered legitimate. In these conditions, and given the historical reading of the Constitution, the strictly regulatory function of the law was drastically diminished in favor of its prescriptive function. This was also an obstacle to the process of making law into positive law (making the rules explicit in law) with two consequences: the norm did not fulfill the function of regulating differences, which on the one hand deactivated the possibilities of social plurality and, on the other, in reality expressed a not particularly plural political context. To the extent that law becoming positive law leads to processes of cultural secularization by differentiating between norms and emotions, its absence led to actions of consensual adherence based mainly on empathy and not on reflection.

All these elements strengthened the official ideology, lending it significant legitimacy. To the extent that this ideology prescribed long-term goals, the effective meaning of the regimen's and the state's efficacy was always considered perfectible

and not immediately accountable. To a great degree, legitimacy was based on “symbolic efficacy” which was, therefore, independent of the real effectiveness of decisions. In other words, and following the thinking of Easton —as Morlino does— the political system was capable of generating an enormous, diffused legitimacy, which is a generic form of support not traceable to particular reasons. Specific legitimacy refers to support for concrete political decisions. Diffused legitimacy was functional not only in general consensual terms, but also to modulate (and invalidate) conflicts on the level of specific legitimacy.

This was possible thanks to the low level of cultural secularity and law as positive law; the unity between the regimen and the political community. In effect, legitimacy is a function of the articulation between the regimen and the community. Given the characteristics of Mexico, this link also translated into the non-differentiation between state and nation.

Today several processes of differentiation can explain the break-up of these units, even though, as is obvious, tendencies to the contrary continue to exist. Among these processes are the reform of the state, with the implications we have pointed out; the struggle for the institutionalization of the electoral sphere,

with its effects on the preeminence of procedures; the plurality of the political community with its ideological concurrence and the necessary adjustments through rules for coexisting; and, with all of these, the differentiation between the political system and the state. A good indicator of this break can be built with reference to a dimension that is related to several factors, among them the weakening of revolutionary nationalism. As a axiological system, it is insufficient for processing today’s social, ideological and political complexities and the spectrum of demands that arise from those complexities, among them two: plurality and democracy. This ideology is functional for non-plural systems and for that reason, it cannot become a horizon for aggregation in the country’s new conditions. That is why recent presidents need to both be with and not be with the party in order to govern. But there is also another clear indicator: the persistent recurrence of civil society as an actor, autonomous vis-à-vis the state and even the political parties. Today, the nation does not fit in a political organization. And this accentuates the differentiation between state and nation, but also between the state and society: they are distinct systems for action and communication. ■■■