Gabriela González Leal, *Legacy*

Our Voice

It was the Roaring Twenties, and in Europe and the United States, people were listening to jazz and dancing the Charleston and the fox trot. The extravagance, the euphoria, the laughter, and the overflowing champagne glasses filled the cabaret nights in an escape toward the future, attempting to erase the memory of the chilling death toll left by World War I and the Spanish Flu. But very soon, they ran into the Great Depression of 1929.

Given the unprecedented nature of some experiences, like the COVID-19 pandemic we're going through now, it's inevitable to try to establish parallels with situations we're familiar with, whether we experienced them ourselves or they're part of our history. However, when we have to deal with what comes and have to try not to go through a greater crisis, it's not very important to read the past if we don't do it with the gaze of people who are aware of what we've lost, but that we've also won something. That gaze must be that of someone who has decided to not continue with the injustice and inequality among countries and among people, someone who has unmasked the pandemic, someone who has benefitted from technology and uses it to fight people's unequal access to it; the gaze of someone who, instead of continuing to increase polarization, builds bridges of conciliation.

In previous issues of *Voices of Mexico*, we've talked about "Changes" and "Connections," about how transformations had come together; while not all of them are attributable to the COVID-19 pandemic, it did speed up the emergence of new realities. This has motivated us, as a continuation of the previous issues, to think in this issue about expectations and possible scenarios. We cover topics like the border, migration, security, bilateral relations with the United States, the environment, First Peoples, social justice, virtuality, education, health, mental health, art, and other cultural expressions.

It seems like today, more than ever, we're attracted by the need for an illusion, a Utopia that can restore our confidence in ourselves as individual and collective inhabitants of the planet, to which, by the way, we owe a great deal.

It is no easy task to project into the future the social life we've been forced to leave behind for almost two years. We're not simply talking about numbers and statistics, but about people who have lost their lives or who have lost a loved one, or someone who has been left disabled, or jobless, or who hasn't had access to health services, of women who were chained to their aggressors under the same roof. But also, it's because in the short term, the horizon doesn't look particularly encouraging.

We would like nothing better than for the crisis to end with better times, but we're the ones who have to make decisions and take actions that can decide how to build the times to come after this intense, painful experience. To do that, we'll have to work very hard, and as a community, face challenges as immense and unpostponable as global warming, the ravages to our health, and growing social, economic, and educational inequality.

Teresa Jiménez
Editor-in-chief of *Voices of Mexico*

Cecilia Estrada Villaseñor*

One Border, Two Borders, Three Borders . . .

A reflection on the current state of the world's borders is undoubtedly an excessively long, laborious exercise to be summarized in a single article. However, I can allow myself a few general reflections that deal in a practical way with where we're going and the way border dynamics are developing.

Questions immediately arise: What were the dynamics of mobility and the respect for human rights at borders before the pandemic? Will the world be the same after the pandemic? That is, are we going to continue to move like before? What will change?

We know that borders are institutions created and changed by human beings in order to put at a distance those considered "different" from one's own community. Based on this, historical-political constructs have been generated, aided by lines of geographical demarcation erected from the perspective of those in power. However, these geographic and physical limits end up being deeply rooted in the social and emotional imaginary of the populations they segregate and those they enclose; this turns them into differential evidence for those living on both sides of them.

In terms of their socio-political dimension, borders are dynamic, producing on one side and the other differences in terms of degrees of economic concentration and with regard to the construction of the space that constitutes the way people institute themselves and come together. On its own, this would be a good reason to allow for maintaining people's ability to transit: generating the circular mobility that invigorates these border areas and at the same time strengthens and regenerates the socio-economic spaces on each side.

Since the 1970s, high, sophisticated barriers began to be perfected and increased along kilometers of borders in Africa, Asia, the Americas, and once again in Europe.

* Professor Estrada Villaseñor received her doctorate in international migration and cooperation for development; she is a researcher at the Comillas Pontificate University Institute on Migration; she can be contacted at cestrada@comillas.edu.

None of them were built with the aim of stopping the advance of enemy armies or invading barbarians. Rather, they were erected fundamentally to avoid the uncontrolled transit of human beings, particularly the always uncontrolled flows of immigrants and refugees at a time when many of their countries of origin didn't even have the capacity to issue passports even if migrants had been able to pay for them.

The barriers erected began then to operate as a symbol of exclusion of "the others" and of the hope of protecting the people itself through the fake image of the so-called "national order." This is another ideological construct, indicative of a manifest inability by the state to govern the migration unleashed by globalization.

This is how individuals are divided between those favored by destiny and the victims of circumstances. Mobility indices in the world are a sign that characterizes our time. For some, the globalized world means an extension of space in their lives. However, for others, it is a drastic decrease in their range of action, not to mention the explosions of racism and xenophobia, until now still sporadic, but more and more frequent in receiving and transit countries. The challenge passes, then, from border policy to domestic policy, allowing us to identify different factors that make up this problem in the sheltered population. These include the scarcity of resources and competition for them among immigrants and refugees; the lack of empathy toward the most disfavored groups; and rejection of the migrant and refugee population.

This evolution of events shows us that migration is no longer represented among the population as a matter of borders. At the same time, the response of the media to these events in destination or transit countries consists merely of informing the public, in the tone of a police crime report or breaking news, without offering any context about the what these people are going through.

About Border Controls

Going back to the beginning, in recent years, national governments have increased their control and exteriorization of borders. The main measures destination countries take to oversee national borders are many and varied: reduction or toughening of legal channels for entry, the intensification of surveillance and security at land and maritime border control stations, the externalization of border management and control in third countries through cooperation agreements, the criminalization of migrants and humanitarian agents acting on the border, the creation of detention centers in third countries, and return and repatriation agreements, among others.

The final objectives of these restrictive policies are to reduce the flow of migrants and refugees and, less explicitly, to "protect" the labor market, the welfare system, and national culture from a substantial rise in immigration and ethnic diversity. If we analyze different contexts and regions throughout the world, we can link the increase in border controls with that of nativist discourses, which explain the phenomenon as an economic and cultural threat to nation-states.

In the case of refugees, an additional tactic is to strengthen transit countries with economic and military resources, in what we could call "outsourcing the border" to distance potential asylum-seekers. This is because international law mandates attending to them through regulated procedures once they arrive to the country where they refuge.

What is done to regulate the cheap labor that the first-world countries need? Paradoxically, the very countries that demand and impose these border controls continue to incorporate migrant workers into their economies, to the point that certain productive sectors in those countries have become structurally dependent on cheap, flexibly available labor. This is a contradiction seen in developed countries like Australia, the United States, or the members of the European Union, but can also be found in developing countries like Angola, South Africa, or Mexico.

The negative consequences of these control and externalization processes, in a context in which the causes that produce these movements continue to exist (forced displacement, income inequality, structural demand for immigrant labor by the developed economies, etc.), are numerous. They include the growth of flows and irregular entries; increased risks, abuses, and deaths during transit and entry; and, linked to the latter, the creation of shadow spaces or black holes along borders, where more violence is systematically inflicted against these people's rights. Another consequence would be the development of a migratory industry linked to these policies, and finally, the maintenance of unequal global distribution when it comes time to share the "burdens" or forced displacement, which continue to be borne disproportion-

ately by poor and developing countries. As has been shown in Australia and Mexico, these risks are not neutral, since they affect the poorest and most vulnerable countries more, in turn causing more people to become migrants and refugees.

We are witnessing, then, a paradigm of control and externalization of borders that goes against the transnational spaces and corridors, both old and new, created by history and international migration itself. They are spaces constructed on the basis of the transnational circulation and articulation of populations and territories whose development and potential are limited by endogenous and exogenous factors to the extent that circulation and mobility are sanctioned.

If I dared formulate possible responses to all these issues from a transversal point of view of the dynamic of borders, I would contribute the following ideas:

1. *Migratory patterns are dynamic and have diversified to the degree that local situations are changing and transforming the migratory flows themselves.* In recent years, their complexity and combined effect have increased, configuring what can be called a mixed migratory flow, a "grey area" between refugees and socio-economic migrants, regular and irregular migrants. The causes of these flows are also mixed. In some cases, they stem from economic factors, mainly the search for job opportunities and/or family reunification. In other cases, people move due to a profound political crisis involving persecution, increased violence and armed strife, and the need to protect themselves sought outside their own borders and/or through international bodies. One consequence of this is the emergence of different migratory statuses: regular and irregular migrants, internal displaced persons, circular migration, people who need international protection, asylum-seekers, detainees, deportees, and returned migrants. In Latin America, this mixture of migratory flows is clear, both toward the North, the United States, and toward the South, Chile.

2. *The reality is different from what the rules say.* Migratory policies designed by governments are not sufficient for managing either the flows over borders or later processes of integration, above all in the case of transit countries, which inevitably also become receiving countries. I must point out that these sys-

> Many circumstances should be eliminated from the border dynamic, such as the morally unacceptable "border returns," linked to the use of violence, which put people's lives at risk.

tems also do not protect the fundamental rights of people on the move. Not only do specific measures exist in border areas, but also other practices there directly or indirectly affect the constitution, maintenance, or changes in a border and center on social interaction and control of mobility. These policies and practices make up what could be called a "vertical, elastic border," which includes not only the border itself, but extends to the entire neighboring country, such as the case of Mexico *vis-à-vis* the United States. Restrictive migratory frameworks and the rigidity that is an obstacle for regularizing migration do nothing more than translate migration into a social vulnerability.

3. *But it is necessary to say that "counter-practices" also exist.* These measures emerge in contexts of migration linked to people's precariousness: solidarity and support for forced migrants to make their journey possible, from their places of origin to their countries of transit and destination. These "counter-practices" have adjusted their services to better adapt to migrants' changing profiles. The give assistance in the form of food, shelter, medical care, legal assistance, education in human rights and health (such as, for example, AIDS prevention), and information about the risks and dangers along the route. All this help allows the migrants to make their journeys more safely and to cross the border. These humanitarian groups have involuntarily gained prominence, and thus have had an impact on politics, becoming the object of attacks from different sources.

4. *Grave violations of migrants' human rights are being perpetrated and are sharpened because mobility makes them vulnerable.* In many cases, these violations are the negative consequences of the aforementioned control policies. With the growth in irregular flows and entries, risks, abuses, and deaths increase during transit and entry, and, linked to this, of shadow spa-

ces or black holes along the borders are created. This is where human rights violations occur systematically, as can be seen in the increased extortion, kidnapping, mutilation, theft, beatings, abuses by immigration agents or police, recurring violence of all kinds (sexual violence, labor and human trafficking, accidents, homicides, the growing number of feminicides), and in the existence of smuggling rings. Part of these abuses are due to the migratory routes being superimposed on those used by drug traffickers and criminal gangs.

At the same time, many circumstances should be eliminated from the border dynamic, such as the "border returns." These morally unacceptable acts are linked to the use of violence and put people's lives at risk.

Lastly, protection during transit is another aspect that must be guaranteed: I'm talking here about people who have often been abandoned to their fate in the middle of the Mediterranean, in the Spanish case, or in the desert, in the Mexican case.

Coming Up Against the COVID-19 Crisis

The pandemic has also had an impact in terms of asylum and refugee-seekers on borders. In Spain, for example, the number of applications dropped from 118,446 in 2019 to 88,762 in 2020.

In many European countries, COVID-19 negatively affected conditions of reception, although it may have had paradoxical results. In any country, regardless of the migrant flow it had received in the past, arrivals suddenly dropped and reception systems were at "zero" levels, allowing them to react and reorganize during the crisis. In these countries, where the reception system was incapable of dealing with all the applicants with a right to assistance before the pandemic, the reduction of applications helped increase the ratio of resolutions. This meant that the service was assured by the corresponding authorities or supported by an NGO in the framework of well-established collaboration with the authorities, regardless of the paralysis undoubtedly suffered in the first moments of the health crisis.

Nevertheless, I fear that the post-pandemic mobilization will have an even greater impact on the factors that were already contributing to inequality and poverty, and therefore, to conditions of mobility. And this is something that I would dare say without any need for thorough studies about the pandemic's impact on the less developed world, simply by looking at its effects in several of them that do not yet have big plans for vaccination. Are we going to continue to mobilizing like we did before the pandemic? What will change?

In the immediate future, so-called "COVID passports" will play a fundamental role in the upcoming global scenario. Clearly, people from countries that easily adopt control measures will have to have one. However, those who for one reason or another could not be vaccinated will see their mobility restricted. Another scenario is that of people who get COVID-19 in border areas: deportations do not include PCR tests or isolation in detention centers.

Despite an increase in some measures to contain migration, such as militarization of borders, the threat of criminalization, encouraged by the false imaginary that it is migrants who are putting public health at risk, is a plausible scenario. In this sense, due to what we have been through and what is happening now, the prospect seems to be for greater restriction of mobility for migrants and refugees, as well as greater inequality *vis-à-vis* residents of destination countries.

The quest for asylum and refuge on borders is finding a solution: humanitarian aid. However, this should not be the "alternative" when asylum and refugee systems are overwhelmed by circumstances. The periodic review and evaluation of national immigration systems and a commitment by all countries to respect human life should be sufficient for outlining how people should be received in accordance with their fundamental rights and the dignity of the individual.

No matter how well-worn and evident the analysis and the solution proposed by academics around this issue may seem, there continues to be a clear-cut lack of the ability to act. Therefore, given the delay in countries' actions and their scant regard for guaranteeing real rights, the question remains: When will we begin to act accordingly?

Borders cannot continue to be factors for separation and division that may sometimes spark clashes between communities. Borders must be bridges to unite different worlds, for the development of "transborder subjects" open to interculturality, agents of change in their lands, committed to a more just, inclusive society. **VM**

Mónica Verea*

Immigration Policy
In Biden's First 100 Days

D uring his first 100 days, President Joe Biden has implemented a much more humane immigration policy than his predecessor's hardline, anti-immigrant position. We could suppose that Biden might easily reverse Donald Trump's changes to the immigration system, given that most of them were made through executive orders. However, that could happen slowly and with a lot of stumbling blocks, mainly because, for the moment, the bureaucracy loyal to the previous president is an obstacle.

From the start, Biden, too, signed several executive orders on immigration issues. The following are the most important policies flowing from them, as well as the promises and actions they imply:

* Professor Verea, the founding director (1989-1997) of the CISAN, UNAM, is currently a CISAN researcher; she can be contacted at mverea@unam.mx.

1. He stopped construction on the border wall. In its place will be a "virtual wall" and "intelligent borders," using latest-generation technology for surveillance. It should be pointed out that his predecessor redirected funds for rebuilding and completing a 453-mile stretch of wall, one of the costliest of his mega-projects, coming to approximately US$15 billion. Biden has proposed that the US$14 billion still unspent be used to repair the environmental damage the project caused.[1]

2. Biden declared a 100-day moratorium on deportations, instructing U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) that it should only deport undocumented migrants with criminal records or those considered a danger to national security. This means that arrests and detentions have decreased 62 percent, dropping from 5,119 to an average of 2,000 from February to March.[2]

Among the factors that significantly increased migrant flows are the feeling that the risk due to the pandemic in the U. S. has shrunk and some of Biden's promises that, intentionally or not, incentivated migration.

3. The president eliminated the travel ban that limited the issuance of visas to foreigners from thirteen African countries with majority Muslim populations.

4. He rolled back the ban on immigration and temporary work visas implemented by Trump during the pandemic. In the case of Mexicans, visas for non-agricultural workers dropped from 72,000 in 2019 to 46,000 in 2020. Visas for highly skilled workers also dropped 50 percent, from 2,700 to 1,500, as did those for intra-company employees, from 5,000 to 2,400, and NAFTA TN visas, from 21,000 to 13,000. By contrast, visas for agricultural workers increased from 188,000 to 197,000, compensating for the drops in the others.[3] In 2020, Central Americans from what is known as the Northern Triangle (El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras) were issued a total of 5,811 temporary visas, while Mexicans received 265,333.[4]

5. President Biden promised to reinstate the DACA and TPS policies suspended by Trump, which negatively affected approximately 700,000 Dreamers, most of them Mexican.

6. He reinstated the Central American Minors (CAM) program, also eliminated by Trump, which allows Central American children to receive refugee status together with a mother or father living legally in the United States.[5]

7. He promised to stop expelling unaccompanied minors, although they continue to be apprehended and most are handed over to adults and families in accordance with public health law Title 42.[6]

Among the promises President Biden made that have not yet been fulfilled are the following:

1. He committed to quadrupling the ceiling on the number of refugees to be admitted for fiscal year 2021. That is, from Trump's infamous 15,000-person limit, Biden would increase it to 62,500. This has not happened due to issues related to the previously approved budget, which means that goal will be difficult to reach.

2. He has gradually let the Migrant Protections Protocols (MPP) or "Remain in Mexico" program lapse. This policy requires asylum applicants to wait in Mexico until their cases are resolved, regardless of their nationality. The MPP forced a total of more than 71,000 asylum-seekers to wait in Mexico until their cases could be considered by U.S. immigration judges; 40,000 of them have already being denied asylum. About 2,200 have been admitted so far; the rest are still waiting in Mexico with pending court cases.[7]

3. The government has begun family reunification of approximately 1,000 of the 5,000 families separated by Trump's zero-tolerance policy since 2017.

In the short term, we can suppose that Biden's problems have increased regarding the Mexico-U.S. border because migratory flows have risen significantly. From November 2020 to March 2021, apprehensions came to 674,330, 60 percent of whom were Mexican citizens. This figure is more than half of all the detentions for 2019 (1,148,000), but a very similar number to those logged in 2020 (646,822), when the pandemic made them drop drastically.[8]

Among the factors that have contributed to the significant increase in migrant flows and therefore of apprehensions since January are, on the one hand, seasonal migration, and, on the other, the feeling that the risk due to the pandemic in the United States has shrunk, as well as Biden's actions or promises that, intentionally or not, have increased the incentive to migrate.

Given the implicit challenge in the significant increase in migratory flows, Biden has committed to building more shelters, quickly transferring children to new facilities, doing what is possible to reunite them with their relatives or U.S. sponsors, and speeding up the review of asylum applications, which currently can take years to reach a final decision. This implies overturning qualitative and quantitative changes made in infrastructure and personnel during the Trump years.

Some Central Americans read these promises to mean that it was time to plan their long, costly journey through Mexico, where they would also be exposed, in addition to the abuses by the *coyotes* (people smugglers), to differ-

ent kinds of violence and theft. They do this in order to surreptitiously cross over the U.S. border or request asylum, escaping from unstable, corrupt governments, fragile economies with no growth at all, poverty, the excessive criminal gang violence, and the devastation left in the wake of hurricanes.

The notable increase of the number of Mexicans crossing the border in recent months has to do, among other things, with the fact that sectors of the population have been affected by a pandemic managed, in my opinion, terribly by the government of Andrés Manuel López Obrador. It is also due to the 8.5-percent decline in Mexico's economy in 2020, added to the fact that in 2019 saw no growth either due to a lack of confidence and reduced investment, causing the loss of thousands of jobs.

We could say that the contrast between Trump's and Biden's policies is amazing. Now, after many years, there is talk of immigration reform, one we Mexicans both here and in the United States have been dreaming of. The Democratic majority in the House of Representatives, supported by Biden, presented a bill called the U.S. Citizenship Act. Introduced by Senator Bob Menendez (D-NJ) and Representative Linda Sanchez (D-CA), among many other measures, it would create a path to citizenship for undocumented migrants, 55 percent of whom are of Mexican origin. The Farm Workforce Modernization Act and the American Dream and Promise Act, both passed in the House, have bipartisan support. The former would provide permanent residency to approximately 1.1 million mainly Mexican undocumented agricultural workers, as long as they can show they have worked 400 days in agricultural activities over the last five years. The latter bill would allow the Dreamers and TPS holders and their families (almost 1.85 million people) to remain in the country legally and eventually apply for citizenship.

All of this is great news for Mexicans, even though we know that without Republican support in Congress, it will be very difficult to get these bills passed. Some Democrats think that comprehensive immigration reform does not have much of a chance of passing and that instead, a piece-meal approach is more feasible.

We also hope they include bills to increase the number of visas for temporary Mexican workers; as mentioned above, their numbers declined in 2020 due to the pandemic. Politically speaking, it is difficult to find the perfect moment for pushing immigration reform through because

A shared plan in the region is indispensable for handling the migratory outflows, discouraging mass caravans, and institutionalizing the return and integration of migrants.

there is no quick, easy solution. Biden's big challenge will be to generate a bipartisan consensus for his immigration reform, whether it is piece-meal or comprehensive.

With regard to migratory relations, Biden and López Obrador came to an agreement to slow the flows of Central American migrants. Although it was not a matter of *quid pro quo*, it resulted in an exchange: the loan of 2.7 million doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine conditioned on our southern border closing for non-essential trips and the deployment of approximately 10,000 National Guard troops to our southern border in addition to those already deployed under pressure from Trump throughout the country in 2019. They have acted as border patrols, even though they had no experience in that capacity. It is important to underline that in the bilateral Remain-in-Mexico accord signed in 2019, President López Obrador accepted the return of asylum-seekers to Mexico without hearings. For some of these people, this meant living in vulnerable and even dangerous conditions, without access to immigration lawyers, which constitutes a violation of their rights. Today, we do not receive children returnees, but we do receive many adults and families.

At the Leaders' Summit on Climate, President Andrés Manuel López Obrador proposed expanding the Sowing Life program to Central America, concretely to the Northern Triangle. The citizens of these countries would receive incomes in exchange for sowing fruit trees and loggable timber on their own land to help them put down roots and avoid poverty-based migration. He proposed to Biden that the peasants participating in this extended Sowing Life program in Central America would have the right to apply for a temporary work visa in the United States after three years. Three years after getting those visas, they would be eligible to become naturalized U.S. citizens and, if they so desired, maintain dual nationality.[9] From my point of view, this is a whim and shows his ignorance about how the U.S. immigration system works. In addition, with a Trump-like contention approach, Biden has

> It is essential that legal channels be opened in the U.S. market for Central Americans to enter; that is, an increased number of temporary work visas.

already come to agreements similar to the one with Mexico with the Central American governments to increase surveillance of their respective borders.

In an effort to deal with the situation, Biden put Vice-president Kamala Harris in charge of border issues and designated her the representative before the Mexican and Central American governments to try to come to a regional agreement. This definitely contrasts with Trump's view; far from supporting them, he drastically cut back annual aid to Central American countries. In the context of the U.S.'s commercial distancing with China, now is the moment when Mexico, its main trade partner, can come to an agreement to create jobs through the supply chains and production for export.

Until now, bilateral measures have sought to unilaterally contain migratory flows. In the short run, it is indispensable that a shared plan be created in the region to handle the processes of migratory outflows, to discourage mass caravans, and to institutionalize the return and integration of thousands of migrants who have been turned back and expelled to settle them in their destination towns or cities. It is also indispensable that the disastrous conditions in the shelters on both of Mexico's borders be dealt with. If it were not for help from NGOs and international agencies, they would be in even worse conditions than they currently are.

The changes Biden has made have been truly transformative in the broadest sense of the word. And we hope that he can change the anti-immigrant rhetoric that prevailed during the Trump era to a more humane, sensible, realistic one that speaks to the economic benefits that immigrants contribute to the U.S. economy and society, as well as takes into account that their labor is absolutely necessary. That would be a discourse that would change the approach to the phenomenon with real prospects for transformation.

As a region, we have to explore the role Canada could play with its greater acceptance of refugees and temporary workers. I think that today we must think about a reality based on the rules imposed by the eventual post-pandemic world, a scenario that would include distance jobs and education using digital resources, in order to support Mexicans and Central Americans. It is essential that legal channels be opened in the U.S. market for Central Americans to enter; that is, an increased number of temporary work visas for agricultural and non-agricultural jobs. Finally, we hope that the US$4 billion Biden has proposed as aid to Central America is approved and sent, even though its results will be felt only in the long run. 〰M

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Notes

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Raúl Benítez Manaut*

The Two-track Relationship Between Mexico And the United States

Four difficult issues affect relations between Mexico and the United States: migration, the border, the pandemic, and militarization and weapons. It is hard to come to agreements about them, and therefore, both governments have two-track movements that can be read as contradictory. The radical change from the Trump to the Biden administration on January 20, 2021, together with the negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, including the border closure, have been difficult to handle for the government of Andrés Manuel López Obrador.

* Professor Benítez is a researcher at the CISAN; he can be contacted at raulmanaut@hotmail.com.

Migration, the Pandemic, and the Border

Mexico's president had to make a great effort both diplomatically and domestically to handle bilateral relations in 2019 given the U.S. threat to break off trade relations and levy a 25-percent tariff on Mexican products. It was not until the renegotiation of NAFTA and the signing of the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) that a new, pragmatic relationship could be established between the two leaders, who occupied opposite sides of the ideological map.

As a result, Mexico had to change its migratory policy. At the outset of his presidency, President López Obrador

had stated that migrants had the human right to freely transit through the country. However, to counter the U.S. threat, he had to deploy the recently launched National Guard,[1] the armed forces, and police from Mexico's southern states to build a police-military wall to stop the migrants desperately trying to reach the United States. In June 2019, Donald Trump and our president signed a migratory agreement, and the two leaders became fast friends.

When Democrat Joseph Biden won the November 2020 elections, López Obrador thanked Trump with his silence. He did not rush to recognize the winner, since the Republican maintained that there had been huge electoral fraud. Mexico applied its diplomatic principle of non-intervention, something that has never been quite understood in the United States.

At the same time, politics north of our border became polarized to unheard-of extremes on January 6, 2021, with the take-over of the Capitol by Republican followers. A second track also appeared in the United States: a key governor for relations with Mexico, Greg Abbot of Texas, a Trump disciple, continues to incite anti-Mexican hate; in June 2021, he insisted on building a new wall on the border with Mexico and began a campaign to arrest immigrants, a stance that has led to a harsh clash with President Joe Biden. In other words, migration and bilateral policy in both countries are also domestic political issues.

In the United States, the issue divides Democrats and Republicans, but this is also the case for the Mexican government. The most important cities in northern Mexico are going through two difficult situations: the accumulation of migrants living in parks and tents and the closure of border crossings for the Mexicans who live on the Mexican side of border but work on the other side of it. The COVID-19 pandemic sparked that closure, something that had never happened before, even during two world wars, the Mexican Revolution, or the Cold War.

Biden demonstrates no particular sympathies toward Mexico, but his immigration and national security team is very actively looking for convergences, and the more than eight million vaccine doses gifted to Mexico help in the reconciliation. In the northern border cities, the one-dose Johnson & Johnson vaccine was given to young Mexicans last June —the older population having already been vaccinated. The aim was to immunize the border population to open up as quickly as possible, something Mexico has been asking for since May. However, the United States has postponed it. Biden has been invited to make an official visit, but that can hardly happen without the border opening being announced beforehand.

In the United States a silent enemy is acting against economic recovery and good relations with Mexico: the people who refuse to be vaccinated. They are also preventing the border from opening up. Biden's dream of all U.S. Americans being vaccinated by last July 4 not only did not come true, but became a nightmare. Most of the deniers are the very followers of Trump and they are profoundly anti-Mexican. Thus, the pandemic also changes bilateral relations.

Two-track Diplomacy

From the Mexican side, relations range from noteworthy offerings of friendship with our neighbor to proposals to transform or eliminate the most important multilateral body where the United States has maintained leadership, the Organization of American States (OAS). Mexico's Latin American policy makes the United States uncomfortable because, from its perspective, it is excluded. The Mexican government thinks —this is an illusion— that the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) can replace the OAS and that it could be transformed into something similar to the European Union.

On the arms issue, both countries have clearly opposite policies. Mexico has sued eleven U.S. arms manufacturers, charging that they are responsible for providing weapons to the criminals who perpetrate the violence in our country. It is highly unlikely that this suit will succeed since these companies, supported by the National Rifle Association, are at the same time very powerful industrial consortia that shelter under the Second Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. This action is based on the idea that the violence in Mexico is due to the free sale of arms in our neighboring country. The defendants in the suit say that they cannot be held responsible and that if weapons cross the border it is due to the incapacity of the justice systems, the corruption of many officials on different levels of government in Mexico who facilitate life for the criminals, the poverty that causes young people to seek false ways out, the lack of customs controls, and weak policing in preventing crime, among other reasons.

Security, a Binational Failure

Binational responsibility is the big anti-crime strategy. In 2007, the U.S. and Mexico designed the Mérida Initiative together. The United States spent more than US\$3 billion between 2008 and 2020 on the professionalization of the police and Mexico's military; the initiative backed the reform of Mexico's slow, corrupt justice system; and attempts were made to reconstruct the cohesion of society. But almost all its aims came to naught.

Mexico's current government does not even want to mention the initiative, since it evokes a past that it wants to leave behind. Since it has not taken a hard line with criminals like "El Chapo" Guzmán, they have been able to broaden their sphere of action. The criminal groups have divided and the number of homicides has tripled: the rate has risen from 8 homicides for every 100,000 inhabitants in 2008 to 23 in 2020. This is one of the most serious bilateral problems, but none of the governments wants to accept its responsibility for this failure, and different interpretations have been offered to explain the increase in violence since 2007.

In the first place, the United States argues that Mexico suffers from huge institutional fragility. And they're not wrong. In some states —and particularly in a large number of municipalities—, criminal organizations have replaced the government, using corruption, cooptation, or threats. The two countries agree that corruption facilitates criminals' job. The Mérida Initiative sought for more than ten years to change the trend through decisive federal intervention, mainly by the intensive deployment of the armed forces. This theory leads to the idea that "militarization" is necessary, and it is currently happening under the López Obrador administration. But, as I pointed out above, they don't even want to mention the failed initiative.

In this context, the October 2020 capture of General Salvador Cienfuegos, former minister of defense under ex-President Enrique Peña Nieto, almost made security-related relations collapse. His release a month later helped bring the crisis under control.

One popular theory developed by U.S. think tanks is that between 2008 and 2013, Mexico was a failed state (though for some, it was merely a weak state, a failure in security measures). They said that the Mexican state did not have the capability to protect itself from the criminal onslaught, and that the Mérida Initiative was created to

> When Biden won the elections, López Obrador did not rush to recognize it: Mexico applied its diplomatic principle of non-intervention, that has never been quite understood in the U. S.

strengthen those capabilities. People also talked about a "coopted state," alluding to the holes and vacuums in the Mexican administration and the lack of accountability, with officials who did not act in the national interest and had favored illegal activities and criminal groups. Examples of this would be the collaboration of the last three governors of the state of Tamaulipas with the Golfo and Zetas cartels; that of the ruling officials in Michoacán during the rise of the Michoacán Family-Templar-Knights groups; and that of the governors of Veracruz and Nayarit.

In the second place, both governments agree that poverty explains the violence. This hypothesis does not hold water if we take into account that it is in the northern states, the most developed part of the country, where criminal violence soared starting in 2007. Waiting for poverty to be overcome in the country, especially with how it has increased due to the measures taken to deal with COVID-19, would condemn Mexicans to endemic violence for many years. This could lead to the growth of the informal economy and, on a municipal and state level, and in some federal bodies, the *de facto* powers would fill in the empty spaces opened up by the weakness of Mexico's government.

In the third place, huge differences exist between the two governments regarding the demand for drugs and the supply of arms as explanatory factors for the violence in Mexico. For the Mexican government, money and drugs come from the United States, and for the U.S. government, Mexico sends the drugs. The U.S. hypothesis presupposes that Mexico is subject to geographical determinism because it is situated between the Andean countries and the United States.

Militarization

As a fourth variable, militarization is the strategy implemented since the Mérida Initiative. The critics of military deployment say that, while this is the quick way to de-

> In the U. S. a silent enemy is acting against economic recovery and good relations with Mexico: people who refuse to be vaccinated. They are also preventing the border from opening up.

stroy the leaderships of the drug trafficking organizations (the high-value target strategy), the war against the cartels only atomizes them, spreading criminal violence to other states. This meant that, from having to deal with two big organizations (the Pacific and Golfo cartels) that carved up the country without serious conflicts in the 1990s, we moved to fighting six criminal monopolies in the times of the Mérida Initiative under what was called the "war against drug trafficking": the Sinaloa, Golfo, Arellano Félix, Carrillo Fuentes, Amezcua Contreras, and Michoacán Family cartels.[2]

That is, with the super-militarization of those years, the criminal groups have grown. In thirteen years, more than half the country has been swept up in increasing violence. In addition, criminal activities have broadened out considerably: almost 200 criminal organizations are currently dedicated to extortion and more than 150 to kidnapping. And these groups have developed much more complex strategies and broadened their scope of action into more than fifty countries. To fight these organizations, President López Obrador trusts only the armed forces: in 2019, he dismantled the Federal Police and created the new National Guard.[3]

Equally, in the last three years, the violence has intensified along the Pacific Coast and in Central Mexico, in Guerrero, Guanajuato, Querétaro, Morelos, and the State of Mexico, among other places, notably affecting agriculture and industry. As if that were not enough, now the Jalisco New Generation cartel is trying to take over Mexico City.

President López Obrador's pacifist strategy, which bets on "hugs, not bullets" is not understood in the United States. It is also not echoed by many Mexicans.[4] In my opinion, they are sending hugs to the Sinaloa cartel and bullets to the Jalisco cartel. The Jalisco cartel is the most important for U.S. security because it is the source of the fentanyl-consumption "epidemic," which has killed so many of its youth.

While the fight against drug trafficking is the cross-cutting issue for the efforts of three Mexican administrations

(Felipe Calderón Hinojosa [2006-2012], of the PAN; Enrique Peña Nieto [2012-2018], of the Institutional Revolutionary Party, or PRI; and Andrés Manuel López Obrador, of Morena) and four U.S. administrations (George W. Bush [2001-2009]; Barack Obama [2009-2017]; Donald Trump [2017-2021]; and Joseph Biden), in recent years, the situation has become more serious and complex.

Final Thoughts

The highest officials in the Biden administration in the spheres of security and migration have visited Mexico several times in the last six months., headed by Vice President Kamala Harris. Their aim is that the differences do not bury the difficult-to-reach agreements. However, increased migration has rekindled nationalist and nativist anti-Latino sentiments in the United States, strengthened by Trump's discourse for four years. On the other hand, the COVID-19 pandemic has hit the border hard, and the governments have not found a real alternative to this crisis. For all these reasons, despite there being two-track policies, cooperation continues. Clearly, both countries are responsible for the failure of the security strategy. **VM**

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Notes

1 Mexico's National Guard is very different from that of the United States, which is made up of civilians who train one weekend a month and two weeks in summer. Mexico's is composed of full-time soldiers and sailors and a group of former federal police officers. It is operationally coordinated by the Mexican army and its members belong to it. Its main activity is public safety, patrolling, and helping the civilian population. Since the beginning of the pandemic it has helped guard hospitals, protect doctors, and, in 2021, collaborate with vaccination.
2 The "war on drug trafficking" was undertaken by the Felipe Calderón administration (2006-2012), headed by the right-wing National Action Party (PAN). [Editor's Note.]
3 This is analyzed in detail in Raúl Benítez Manaut and Elisa Gómez, eds., *Fuerzas Armadas, Guardia Nacional y violencia en México* (Mexico City: Fundación Friedrich Ebert, Colectivo de Análisis de la Seguridad con Democracia 2021), www.casede.org.
4 This government strategy is based on the idea that peace is the result of justice, and therefore it has sought to attack violence and insecurity by resolving its causes and putting an end to structural injustice. See "Defiende López Obrador su política de 'abrazos, no balazos,'" *La Jornada* videos, July 30, 2019, https://videos.jornada.com.mx/video/14017588/defiende-lopez-obrador-su-politica-de-abrazos-no-b/. [Editor's Note.]

José Luis Valdés-Ugalde*

The Return of the Hegemon

When talking about Trump's withdrawal from the world order, we first have to say that liberal internationalism has historically been the framework within which the United States has defined its international policy. This is a space in which multilateralism and international organizations like the United Nations, created by Washington and its allies in the post-WWII era, tended toward achieving economic, political, and social arrangements that would provide global governance with certainty and equilibrium. At the same time, it would act as containment for the dangers to world peace represented for the West by the actions of the Soviet bloc. That is to say, it was a broad front of the West and at the same time a firm component of the control that the Western nations aimed to have over the dominant bi-polar situation during the entire Cold War. Since that time, regardless of whether the Republicans or the Democrats were in office, the United States has been a "liberal hegemon." Thus, U.S. domination prevailed the world over, and the *Pax* Americana was the sign of those times, meaning that under its umbrella, relative peace could be maintained.

What happened in 2020? After Trumpism's long night, when U.S. power declined even more, we are once again seeing a United States recovering these instincts that Trump had pushed aside. Whether we like it or not, the United States has been, in Doug Stokes's words, a "structurally advantaged" hegemon, both a creator of systems and the one who enjoys their privileges.[1] It has a privileged position in the international sphere, since it acquires the benefits of cooperation without resorting to coercion —at least not always—, while reinforcing its place in the international community, and it reinvents itself in ways that contribute to prolonging its hegemony. From being a nonliberal hegemon during that stage, now, with Joe Biden, we are witnessing Washington's spirited return, willing to make up for lost time and claim its "right" to domination. At the same time, it will attempt to revert the decline of

* Professor Valdés-Ugalde is a researcher and former director of the CISAN (2001-2009) and currently editor-in-chief of *Norteamérica, revista académica*; he can be contacted at jlvaldes@unam.mx.

its hegemony *vis-à-vis* actors like China, Russia, or the European Union. All Secretary of State Antony Blinken's actions point to the return of certain U.S. practices that aim to make its presence felt on the international stage through initiatives that would impose its positions and displace other actors who could potentially disrupt the "American Way of Life."

At least three scenarios exist in which the Biden doctrine seems to be becoming a reality:

1. *Its flirting with Japan and South Korea*, which put China on notice that Washington will not stop considering these two allies in its containment strategy *vis-à-vis* Chinese power;
2. *The U.S. decision to return to and recover the Iran nuclear deal*. This is a clear sign to the European Union and Russia that it aims to recover stability and world order and contain Iran through intelligent diplomacy; and,
3. *The warning to Russia,* among other things, through the expulsion of Russian diplomats from the U.S. This puts Russia on notice that the United States will not tolerate disruptions in its domestic life and that of that of European countries that are attempting to recover the democratic spaces subjected to autocratic coups backed by Moscow. This latest initiative and the decision to punish President Vladimir Putin for his excesses against U.S. democracy also aim to put a distance between Trumpism and the current administration and isolate it in its crusade —which has not been particularly successful, judging by the Republican rejection of the "America First" caucus's attempts to turn itself into a political current inside Congress and the Republican Party.

To understand what this intention of recovering world preeminence implies, we should look at the diagnostic analysis that the Biden administration published in its "Annual Threat Assessment. Intelligence Community Assessment," developed by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, the head of U.S. political-military intelligence. This document goes point by point through the risks the United States is facing, starting with certain actors (China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea) and continuing with the big issues (COVID-19, climate change, global terrorism, and cybersecurity, among others).[2]

II

The roads taken over time and in each specific historic and immediate moment by the great powers are both mysterious and challenging. How this behavior and relationship of forces generate an architecture that sheds light on issues and regions the actors might be focusing on in order to consolidate their traditional spaces of power and other new ones also invites analysis. In this geopolitical exercise, certain countries and entire regions may be useful for achieving those objectives. The case of the Ukraine is a recent example of this: Russia, more than anyone, continues to spark reactions in the West (including NATO) by resorting to mobilization of troops along the Ukrainian border, particularly in the so-called "independent" areas, Donetsk and Luhansk. In these two pro-Russian separatist regions, Putin deployed para-military units close to him, threatening Ukrainian sovereignty in order to provoke a reaction from Washington. He got it when Biden telephoned him to agree to a swift meeting, programed for June 16, even though the issue itself was not mentioned. This happened only weeks after the U.S. president called his Russian counterpart a "killer."

The phone call had its effect, and Putin retreated after achieving his aim of being feared more than loved by the West. Whatever the result of this bellicose-political action, the truth is that the Ukraine continues to be hostage to a conflict begun by Russia and that the West has not been able to untangle.

Now, the aforementioned diagnostic analysis includes a broad variety of actors and issues as pending security matters for the United States. At the same time, they are obstacles for achieving U.S. hegemonic aims: in the section called "China's Push for Global Power," it lays out as the first objective dissuading the Asian giant in order to achieve the new global order that the United States pursues for its benefit. According to Antony Blinken, this is the United States' greatest geopolitical test. While noting that

> Whether we like it or not, the U.S. has been, a "structurally advantaged" hegemon, both a creator of systems and the one who enjoys their privileges.

China has the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to seriously challenge all the rules, values, and relationships that make the world work the way U.S. wants it to.

China will continue to pressure Washington, it also states that the Chinese leadership will seek out tactical opportunities for reducing tensions with Washington when they are in its interests. The analysis also adds that it will maintain its innovative and industrial policies because the Chinese leaders see this strategy as necessary for reducing the dependency on foreign technologies, making military advances possible, sustaining economic growth, and therefore, ensuring the survival of the Communist Party.

As is clear, the analysis deals with China's economic advancement and the ideological traditions represented to a large degree by local communism that has opted for a centralized state capitalism. The idea is to follow China's initial process for producing what the United States calls an era-making geopolitical change; the aim would be for Washington to counter China's containment measures, the greatest geopolitical test of the twenty-first century. For Blinken, China is the only country with the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to seriously challenge the stable, open international system, that is, all the rules, values, and relationships that make the world work the way U.S. wants it to. "Our relationship with China will be competitive when it should be, collaborative when it can be, and adversarial when it must be. The common denominator is the need to engage China from a position of strength."[3]

In contrast with Russia or the other cases included in the analysis, Washington takes China the most seriously. This is because its economic dynamism poses an enormous challenge for the United States, particularly regarding trade, which in turn gives rise to other challenges that Beijing represents, including the military one.

The difference between Biden's and Trump's presidencies is that, when speaking of China, the former consistently puts forward positions of the rational decision-making center that the Republican left in the dust during his four years of global dis-governance. This will be the most relevant aspect of this strategy for U.S. hegemony, and even more so if we add that he will carry it out in collaboration with his allies.

III

Just as the recent Israel/Palestine conflict demonstrates —in a situation that has developed over seventy-three years, which last May 20 came to a shaky ceasefire after eleven days of pyromania by both less and less trustworthy actors—, the situation and instability in the Middle East show no signs of diminishing in intensity or complexity. Both this and the ongoing war in Yemen and the frictions between Saudi Arabia and Iran threaten to destabilize the region even more.

Although Biden has tried to be coherent in his Middle East policy, containing China continues to be the central axis of his international concerns. His efforts are doubled down not only due to China's status as a geopolitical rival, but because Beijing is attempting to play an increasingly important role in the Middle East. This can be seen in the ties it has forged with certain countries through its One Belt, One Road initiative and the consolidation of cooperation agreements such as the twenty-five-year investment plan with Iran.

In the current context, when the United States is back and poised to exercise the geopolitical domination it has critically carved out for itself, it is appropriate to ask ourselves how China's growing influence in the region will affect the interests of our neighbor and other actors.

It would seem that Washington's roads cross with those of Beijing, both focused, together with the rest of the UN Security Council countries and Germany, on reviving the nuclear agreement with Iran and attempting to dampen down the regional risks that it represents for U.S. hegemonic policy. The aforementioned "Annual Threat Assessment" sketches out Washington's concern about Iran: in its opinion Iran will represent a continual threat for the United States and allied interests in the region, since it is attempting to erode U.S. influence and support Shia populations abroad, entrench its influence, and project its power on to neighboring states. Although the weakened Iranian economy and its poor regional reputation are obstacles to this aim, Teheran will test out a variety of tools (diplomacy, the expansion of its nuclear program, and military sales acquisitions to Hamas in Palestine and Hizballah in Lebanon,

among others) to advance its objectives. And the document states, "We expect that Iran will take risks that could escalate tensions and threaten U.S. and allied interests in the coming year."[4]

This is the position about the threat Iran represents in political-military terms. The importance Biden is giving to reviving the nuclear agreement, then, should come as no surprise. Bringing Iran back into it would lead to a relative decrease in the threat it poses. Washington already sees Netanyahu as a bull in a china shop who threatens to break the precarious existing consensuses in the Democratic Party and Congress, where a historic change of position regarding Israel seems to be brewing. The viciousness and expansionism of an extreme right-wing ethnic nationalism when dealing with Hamas's paramilitary intemperance and complete lack of political strategy make it increasingly urgent to placate Iran and avoid having another elephant in the fragile anteroom of the conflict. This would be the most intelligent strategy if the idea is to get the main actors in the conflict to sit down and negotiate with the backing of Iran and Israel. However, a successful nuclear pact in Iran will have to include an urgent change in Israel's domestic policy, and that includes Netanyahu and his hawks' leaving office. **VM**

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Notes

1 Doug Stokes, "Trump, American Hegemony and the Future of the Liberal International Order," *International Affairs*, vol. 94, no. 1 (January 2018), pp. 133-150.
2 This document was published April 13, 2021 at https://www.dni.gov/index.php/newsroom/reports-publications/reports-publications-2021/item/2204-2021-annual-threat-assessment-of-the-u-s-intelligence-community, accessed in June 2021. [Editor's Note.]
3 The author is referring here to a speech Blinken gave on March 3, 2021, about the document "Interim National Security Strategic Guidance" (Washington, D. C.: The White House, March 2021), https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NSC-1v2.pdf. [Editor's Note.]
4 Office of the Director of National Intelligence, "Annual Threat Assessment of the Intelligence Community," April 13, 2021, https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/ATA-2021-Unclassified-Report.pdf, p. 12. [Editor's Note.]

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Gabriela Anaya Reyna*

Changes and Inertias: Environmental Prospects in Times Of the Anthropocene

Sometimes I forget that I'm one of the billions of organisms that are a part of the millions of species on the planet. I'm trained to perceive and recognize nature and other elements of my environmental and social surroundings, but I find it difficult to step outside of the role of main character of this work that is my brief life. Just as individual consciousness blurs my scale and relations of interdependence, the same seems to occur to other people and numerous societies. Individuality brings with it a myopia whose grand total and synergy have transformed the Earth.

* Gabriela is an independent advisor on environmental philanthropy and multisectoral collaboration and the senior advisor in Mexico at the David and Lucile Packard Foundation; she can be contacted at gabriela.anaya.reyna@gmail.com.

The Age of Wicked Problems

The Holocene, the last 10,000 years on Earth, has been a relatively stable period, conducive to the development of human civilizations. Nevertheless, the most recent period of this era has been marked by changes in several of the parameters of the Earth's system beyond the natural spectrum of Holocene variability. Although many people refute the idea that these changes are the result of human activity, the scientific consensus points in the opposite direction and to the fact that we are headed to a world that is different from the one that has existed for all of modern history. This new era, which some scientists call the Anthropocene, is defined by the role of the human species as a driving force of the evolution of the Earth's system.

It is also called that because of the existence and synergy of a broad gamut of environmental problems derived from population growth, changes in habits and levels of consumption, our energy choices, and the changes in the use of the soil and transportation of organisms, among other factors.

We are very familiar with some of the environmental problems, although their solutions are still pending: for example, over-fishing, the reduction of available water, and the loss of biodiversity. Others are emerging: that is, the scientific community is in the process of recognizing them or has only recently recognized them as important, but the public is not yet aware of them, such as the increase in dead areas in the ocean. All these problems are produced and manifest themselves to differing degrees and affecting different areas. Some, like the contamination of aquifers, have relatively specific causes and consequences. Others, like climate change, develop and show their effects over the course of many years and may have global implications. In the latter case, not all societies contribute equally to the problems, but we all experience —or will experience— its consequences one way or another. The aftermath of complex problems does not distinguish between who contributes to them or take into consideration issues of equity and justice.

The common denominator of many of these problems is their complexity. They are difficult to define with precision; they are socially complex, and many parts and factors contribute to their development. They are also multi-generational: they do not have a point where they end or a clear solution. These kinds of problems are often called "wicked problems." Their complexity increases due to the

21 Issues for the 21st Century

Cross-cutting issues	Aligning governance to the challenges of global sustainability
	Transforming human capabilities for the twenty-first century: meeting global environmental challenges and moving toward a green economy
	Broken bridges: reconnecting science and policy
	Social tipping points? Catalyzing rapid and transformative changes in human behavior toward the environment
	New concepts for coping with creeping changes and imminent thresholds
	Coping with migration caused by new aspects of environmental change
Food, biodiversity, and land issues	New challenges for ensuring food safety and food security for nine billion people
	Beyond conservation: integrating biodiversity across the environmental and economic agendas
	Boosting urban sustainability and resilience
	The new rush for land: responding to new national and international pressures
Freshwater and marine issues	New insights on water-land interactions: shift in the management paradigm?
	Shortcutting the degradation of inland waters in developing countries
	Potential collapse of oceanic systems requires integrated ocean governance
	Coastal ecosystems addressing increasing pressures with adaptive governance
Climate change issues	New challenges for climate change mitigation and adaptation: managing the unintended consequences
	Acting on the signal of climate change in the changing frequency of extreme events
	Managing the impacts of glacier retreat
Energy, technology, and waste issues	Accelerating the implementation of environmentally-friendly renewable energy systems
	Greater risk than necessary? The need for a new approach for minimizing risks of novel technology and chemicals
	Changing the face of waste: solving the impending scarcity of strategic minerals and avoiding electronic waste
	The environmental consequences of decommissioning nuclear reactors

Source: The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), "21 Issues for the 21st Century: Results of the UNEP Foresight Process on Emerging Environmental Issues," 2012.

It is no surprise that the first change in paradigms needed involves reconciling human development, progress, and the Earth's systems' ability to sustain them.

fact that they also emerge at the intersection of economic, demographic, and social problems. The perception and recognition of environmental issues and problems is not a simple matter either. Causes and effects are oversimplified, ignored, polarized, twisted, dissimulated, and postponed in our minds as well as in society as a whole, and in economic and political systems. Not coming to agreements about what causes them and what these issues imply favors inaction and resorting to partial solutions that do not measure up to their true dimension and importance.

In 2012, the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) created a panel of experts to identify emerging environmental problems of the twenty-first century (see table). The twenty-one issues identified are the result of a survey among more than 400 of the world's scientists. Although not exhaustive, the list reflects the diversity of fronts that have to be opened to deal with the numerous environmental tensions that will characterize the coming years, as well as their socio-economic effects. Given that the analysis was carried out almost a decade ago, the report does not include the lessons and reflections we have been left with by COVID-19 and its intersection with the environment, health, and the economy. One of these, for example, is the interaction between the disease and bad air quality. The list also omits issues related to the impact of race and gender, as well as North-South inequalities with regard to environmental problems.

Changes of Perspective

We cannot say precisely what the coming era will be like, since the Earth's systems are complex, multi-factorial, and difficult to predict. What we can say is that the changes are accelerating and the levels and scales of connection among several of them are moving from local to global. The aforementioned UNEP document states that the points of inflection of the climate system and that of

other planetary limits, as well as their interaction with environmental chain reactions imply a transition to a new state and a new way of being in the world. This transition requires more awareness and the development of new paradigms that guide recognition and our way of acting around environmental issues. The change in paradigms involves many shifts and new ways of thinking about problems, drivers, and solutions.

It will come as no surprise that the first of these changes involves reconciling human development, progress, and the Earth's systems' ability to sustain them. In contrast with the most optimistic, I do not believe that this reconciliation will take place through the massive, ubiquitous deceleration of economic growth. Parameters and interpretations of development exist that are quite difficult to reverse on a global scale. We will have to use science —not only environmental science, but also economics, politics, social, and cognitive sciences— as well as technology to ensure that human development takes place in a more just, egalitarian way without pressuring planetary systems more than is already occurring.

No wicked problem exists, including that of human development and environmental problems, that can be resolved with a silver bullet, by a single discipline, or a single actor, sector, or organization. What is needed is to deal with this taking into account the complexity, uncertainty, and conflicts of values linked to these problems through comprehensive, crosscutting, and systems-thinking approaches. Problems and issues we used to approach individually now must be dealt with as a whole, some on a global scale, taking into consideration their interconnections. This does not reduce the importance of continuing to work on issues familiar to us, such as making food systems more sustainable and fairer, creating better forms of governance for water, the land, and the sea, or multiplying the use of environmentally friendly energy uses.

The overall focus also implies, among other things, assuming that technology and science, even using transdisciplinary approaches, will not be enough to resolves the problems of the future. Other elements and conditions are needed, including the development of an ethical-social agenda for the environment and the resulting growth of a broad-based, diverse environmental constituency willing to act collaboratively.

We must recognize that environmental problems are also sociological. Their framing, including the question

of whether they constitute a public issue or crisis or not, is a social construction. As such, they are closely linked to political contexts and challenges. The narratives centered on priority issues, such as climate change, are the basis for values and institutions and have an impact on decisions and actions; therefore, they inhibit or speed up change. As such, these narratives are also at the root of future alternatives that we must imagine and build.

New Joint Routes

The world's health crisis has sensitized us to the effects of uncertainty in society and in mental health. The pandemic has also underlined individual fragility, as well as that of social and economic groups. It has been an alarm bell regarding our limitations for responding and adapting to large-scale impacts, like climate change, and the barriers we run up against when we try to do so. All this has happened at the same time that different regions are already facing climate disasters that, like COVID-19, remind us that the world is not prepared for slowing environmental problems like climate change or for living with them.

Up until now, it has not been possible to develop a feeling of true social urgency about global environmental problems. Voices have been raised, and regulations, institutions, and processes are underway. There have also been successes, but no sustained mobilization exists nor are there full-scale solutions that point to a less uncertain environmental future. The reasons for this are many, including inertia, resistance, and values and patterns associated with certain economic development models in the world. They also involve psychological and political resistance to responding to threats that we do not perceive as imminent or personal.

It's not a cliché. Expectations for the Earth, and therefore for individuals and societies, are complex. It is difficult not to sound alarmist when saying it, but saying the opposite would be to fall into the negationist trap. The environmental crisis is real, tangible, and already here. This does not necessarily imply images of total destruction, but it does involve changes that must be recognized, accepted, and dealt with. It is time to embrace and foster a new way of being in the world, to see ourselves closely linked to the environment and other human beings, to transcend sectoral approaches, innovate, collaborate, to create transformational narratives, and to correct routes whose end-points we already know. In the face of environmental change, we have to take off the blindfold and vaccinate ourselves against inertia. **VM**

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Graciela López / Cuartoscuro.com

Marcela Azuela Gómez*

Social Justice, the Pandemic, And the Right to Employment

The government doesn't give us any support at all. Our children have to help us out. Some brothers and sisters have nothing. We need social security health care and the right to housing. We don't want hand-outs; we want work. Thanks to our work, we eat. The right to a job for non-wage workers is very necessary.

(Guillermo Ramayo, representative of the Plaza Garibaldi Troubadours Union)

They didn't let me back into the house where I had worked for three years. They asked me to put the keys in through the window so they wouldn't catch it. Since that day, my boss hasn't taken my calls.

(Adela Guerrero, domestic worker)

Our incomes have gone down a lot during the pandemic. This makes us vulnerable. We need the authorities to implement a program for decent housing for informal workers.

(Román Dichi Lara, representative of the Organ-grinders Union of Mexico)

Given the lack of government support, we have created a mutual support system among ourselves. When a person is sick, he or she gets Mex$2,000. When someone dies, the family is given Mex$120,000. To do this, each of us contributes Mex$650 a month. This is the way we've found to take care of each other. As of February 2021, fifteen brothers or sisters have died of COVID-19.

(Erick Díaz, representative of the Mexico City Photographers Union)

* Ms. Azuela Gómez is a family therapist and activist working for equality, non-discrimination, and the defense of domestic workers' labor rights; she can be contacted at marcelazuela@gmail.com.

Talking about social justice during the pandemic requires seeing and hearing those who embody the consequences of inequality. These people's words give us a small taste of what more than half the population making their living in the informal sector are experiencing in Mexico.

Social justice presupposes equal rights and the possibility for all human beings to benefit from economic and social progress everywhere. Promoting social justice not only means increasing incomes and creating jobs, but doing so in a way that that process is compatible with human rights, dignity, and autonomy. In that sense, the transition from the twentieth to the twenty-first century has shown us how economic growth as an end in itself and not seen as a means to achieving human security and quality of life has wrought more poverty, social polarization, and ecological precariousness.

Consensus exists today about the desirability of economic growth with social justice. On November 26, 2007, the UN General Assembly declared February 20 World Day of Social Justice to remind us of the importance that signer states must carry out concrete actions so that all people without distinction can exercise all their rights in the framework of sustainable development. This includes decent work; equality of men and women; universal, inclusive education with a human rights perspective; universal health; access to decent housing; and the elimination of racism, classism, homophobia, xenophobia, sexism, ableism, and other stigmas against people that naturalize relations of privilege and subordination.

We need these and other rights to be able to live with dignity and have quality of life, not just to survive in a polarized society with generalized labor precariousness, which unfortunately is the day-to-day existence of many people. This context was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. For a year and a half, we have stopped the normal course of working life, prioritizing certain activities considered more essential than others, demanding that both men and women work from home.

In a country like Mexico, where more than half the population works at informal jobs, this becomes a demand that cannot be met. Thus, the pandemic has brought to the fore social injustice and all the pending tasks we have for guaranteeing the rights of all persons in order for social justice to be achieved.

There is no doubt that those who already lived in situations of discrimination and labor inequality have

> Promoting social justice not only means increasing incomes and creating jobs, but doing so in a way that that process is compatible with human rights, dignity, and autonomy.

had greater difficulties in the face of COVID-19. Obviously, those already experiencing exclusion because they didn't have a formal job and, as a result, didn't have access to private medial insurance or public social security health care, have been left without the possibility to have orientation to protect their health, be treated in clinics, or acquire medications. This is the case of migrants or agricultural day-laborers, non-wage workers, domestic workers, street-market or delivery workers, volunteers in public cleaning services, street musicians, parking attendants, and other similar kinds of laborers.

In addition, we need to take into account that informal workers are more discriminated against when they are women, disabled, indigenous-language speakers, or migrants. And it is not only a matter of health care; they have also had to deal with serious economic problems because they cannot leave the house to work.

When we talk about how social justice for informal workers has been affected, we come face to face with the fact that day after day during the pandemic they have had no income whatsoever. People employed in the informal sector cannot offer their services at a distance. They have had to resort to relatives and friends, sell their belongings, and even change their eating habits. In addition, many of them have had to move to other cheaper, smaller accommodations, change cities, or go to live with relatives because of their lack of income.

Because of its importance, I want to emphasize this issue of housing. Today, when we have turned our work, education, and even recreation inward to our homes, we realize the importance of having an ample, appropriate, ventilated, sunny space with Internet connectivity. This ideal housing is reflected in our physical and mental health. Generally, people who experience economic vulnerability live on the city's outskirts and do not have services as basic as running water. They cannot achieve social distancing or access the hygiene measures needed to protect themselves form the virus, which is aggravated by over-

crowding and the need to travel long distances in public transportation in the case of those who could not stop working. It is not only that the house does not protect them from contagion; it can even become a place for the propagation of the disease. In addition, families' being closed up together without privacy or spaces for each of their members to develop has increased cases of violence in the home.

We can see, then, that situations involving social injustice are widespread. However, I think it's fundamental in this context of the pandemic to reflect about the right to employment. According to Inter-American Development Bank figures, in 2020, in Mexico, COVID-19 caused the loss of 18 percent of formal jobs and 40 percent of informal jobs, for a total of 58 percent.[1] If we zero in on Mexico City, a study by Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO) showed that in 2019, informal work made up 51.3 percent of all jobs.[2] This means that more than half the population has no kind of benefits like pensions, savings, health services, or childcare. Their only alternative is to use whatever small amount of savings they have —if they have any at all—, or resort to the solidarity of relatives and friends.

Many domestic workers were sent home "to rest" without pay and with no date for returning. This means they were fired without any severance pay. A large part of informal workers, particularly female heads-of-households, are financially responsible for their children and have no one else to take on that role. So, leaving them without work meant leaving an entire family without food, housing, and healthcare. While the economic consequences of the pandemic have been very difficult to deal with for everyone, these examples show the degree of vulnerability of those who do not have a formal job. And we don't know how long we will take to recover the little road advanced in this area.

Given this situation, the outlook is not very encouraging. The economic and social crisis we are facing in 2021 is much more profound for those who lack decent working condi-

> The pandemic brought with it a revolution in the way we relate to each other both work-wise and personally. We have gone through changes that only a short while ago would have seemed unthinkable.

tions. Everything indicates that not only the coming months, but the coming years will be uphill for these people. But the responsibility for making their situation better does not fall on their shoulders: it's not a matter of their solely having the will to work. What is needed to fight the inequality they are experiencing. I have brought together a series of ideas being promoted in civil society in recent months, proposals the authorities, organizations, and all of society in constant dialogue with those affected by the COVID-19 pandemic have the responsibility to carry out:

1. *Making visible the working conditions of informal workers*. These people, the value of their work, their contribution to society, and the situation they live in must be seen in order to create empathy and solidarity among the public, as well as to demand the authorities guarantee their rights. Both the media and social media are excellent channels for sending the entire population messages that make it possible to truly see what non-wage workers experience.

   It is important that the authorities and everyone know who we are, what our contribution is as non-wage workers: traditions, identity, services. We offer an economic contribution. We are generators of the local economy.

   (Erick Díaz, representative of the Mexico City Photographers Union)

2. *Universal healthcare*. The pandemic makes the urgency of this right very clear, regardless of people's working conditions. Access to social security health care must be restructured for all, men and women. This is a historic debt of the state, and, after the COVID-19 crisis, it cannot be postponed.

   Before, we had access to the clinic for non-wage workers, and they took that away from us; they left us with nothing. Our children have to help us out. Some brothers and sisters have nothing.

   (Guillermo Ramayo, representative of the Plaza Garibaldi Troubadours Union)

3. *A minimum living income*. It is absolutely necessary to provide an income that allows people to subsist who are at risk of hunger or to their health who have no other

social support, until they can return to their economic activities or can reinsert themselves in the so-called "new normal." This must be done through direct transfers. Several organizations have taken this proposal to legislators and it would be a great support for those who have lost so much.

> With the pandemic, we no longer eat three meals a day; now it's only two.
>
> (Adela Guerrero, domestic worker)

4. *Take social rights seriously*. We cannot minimize the importance of these rights or think that the market will self-regulate. Jobs have to be guaranteed in times of crisis, firings, wage cuts, and the dismantling of the social security system prohibited.

> I got COVID in December, which was a month with a lot of expenses to get oxygen; and in all that time, I didn't make a cent.
>
> (Román Dichi, representative of the Organ-grinders Union of Mexico)

5. *Offer governmental economic support* and non-interest loans so workers can restart their activities.

> "We need the government to see us and support us."
>
> (Guillermo Ramayo, representative of the Plaza Garibaldi Troubadours Union)

The pandemic brought with it a revolution in the way we relate to each other both work-wise and personally. We have gone through changes that only a short while ago would have seemed unthinkable. We have seen that we can adapt to new scenarios, and now it's very clear that urgent changes are needed so those who experience social injustice can improve their living conditions. We cannot ignore the needs of the most vulnerable. It is the government's responsibility, and that of the entire society, to offer mechanisms to ensure that everyone can exercise all their rights. **VM**

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Notes

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Liliana Cordero Marines*

Community Organization And Participation The Future of U.S. And Mexican First Peoples

Despite the very broad cultural diversity of the first peoples of the Americas, they all share some characteristics: they are ruled by communitarian principles and they have a ceremonial conception of life, which links both the wisdom and knowledge of their ancestors to aspects of the territories where they live. Several things differentiate theirs from European languages. They are also descendants of the survivors who faced the ominous fifteenth-century conquest and pillage. Even today, they inhabit the areas that are lagging the most socially and economically and are the lowest on social development indices.[1] This is why determination, resilience, and resistance have become inherent to their day-to-day lives, indispensable for protecting their existence as human beings, maintaining the sovereignty of their peoples, and guaranteeing their rights and those of future generations.

The struggle these peoples have undertaken to ensure their survival and economic and political self-determination has had different overtones and remains in constant flux. The preservation of territory, of the language, and of cultural identity is, among other things, the common thread running through this unending battle. Land ownership guarantees them the possibility of living a specific

kind of life, of practicing and watching over their respective customs, but also of access to natural resources, just like before the establishment of nation-states and colonization. At the same time, the preservation of their cultural identity and their communities and the revitalization of their languages have become tools used generally for cohesion, empowerment, and self-determination. However, the geopolitical specificities of the places they inhabit means that their struggle includes a broad gamut of goals.

The Struggle of U.S. American Indians At the Start of the Biden Administration

Today, the U.S. indigenous population, made up of both what are known as U.S. American Indians and the first peoples of Alaska, comes to almost six million. In 2020, the government recognized 574 tribal bodies. While the native nations have sovereignty and the government must consult them about everything involving their territories, the fact is that the situation is contradictory, and since the state has full powers over the indigenous nations, they exist under its tutelage and depend on it.[2] They also occupy a marginal place in relation to the rest of U.S. citizens. They have a more unfavorable economic situation,

* Professor Cordero Marines is a researcher at CISAN, UNAM; she can be contacted at lilianacorde@gmail.com.

the highest unemployment levels, and the lowest levels of schooling.

Indigenous territories have always been the object of big business interests that want to exploit their resources, and Donald Trump's presidency (2017-2021) was no exception. Multiple permits were issued for extraction of natural resources, frequently with huge environmental implications and health risks due to the potential contamination of the soil and water. The Keystone XL pipeline, for example, crosses rivers and negatively affects biodiversity; the Dakota Access pipeline was approved before the environmental reviews for it even concluded; the Enbridge Line 3 also crosses rivers and indigenous territories; in Alaska's Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, a concession was granted for drilling oil; the mining project undertaken by Resolution Copper Arizona implies damage to sacred indigenous sites; in South Dakota, the Dewey Burdock uranium mine seriously affects several areas of enormous spiritual value for the Lakota Nation, etc., etc.

Each of these companies has faced fierce opposition and mobilization by indigenous communities, whether through bringing legal suit for stopping the projects or by holding public demonstrations to increase pressure and media visibility. However, at the beginning of Joe Biden's presidential term, the U.S. American and Alaskan native peoples find themselves in a special moment. In the context of the rejection of cultural diversity and disregard for climate change that characterized the Trump administration, the current Democratic president held high the banner of creating the most inclusive cabinet in history and situating the United States once again as a world leader in the fight against climate change.

As part of this strategy, Biden proposed Deb Haaland as the head of the Department of the Interior, a Democratic congresswoman from the Laguna Pueblo Native U.S. American community. In addition to being the first native U.S. American to hold such a high post in the history of the country, her appointment is also important because it creates unprecedented visibility for these peoples and because the Department of the Interior is in charge of managing the nation's natural resources, including oil and gas, the national parks, and indigenous territories. In fact, Haaland has stated that one of her objectives will be to contribute to heal the link between the government and first peoples. Among other things, she has created a working group to deal with the climate change emergency, with

> "We urge you to fulfill the U. S. promise of sovereign relations with Tribes, and your commitment to robust climate action," reads a letter to Biden signed by women indigenous leaders.

the stipulation that this team will have to take into account the tribal consultations about the issue. In this sense, the native, first peoples are expected to take an active part in decisions on these issues, as well as in the revocation of a large number of rules that imply environmental set-backs. Fundamentally, the idea is to halt the opening of protected territories to the exploitation of their natural resources.

Along these same lines, on his first day in office, Joe Biden stopped construction on the Keystone XL project, just as he had promised during his campaign. After a decade of organizing and mobilizations, this was seen as a victory, an act of restorative justice, and a message of hope to the native communities, since it represented an unprecedented alignment of governmental interests and native knowledge and customs. Now, for these communities, the struggle does not end there; rather, they hope to put a stop to other similar projects (Dakota Access Pipeline and the Enbridge Line 3) that threaten their territories and cause serious environmental damage. Pressure on President Biden has already begun, since it is not yet clear if he will leave behind the domestic policy of energy production launched by Barack Obama: "No more broken promises, no more broken Treaties ... We urge you to fulfill the United States promise of sovereign relations with Tribes, and your commitment to robust climate action," reads a letter to the current president signed by seventy-five women indigenous leaders.[3] This shows that the first peoples' organizations are alert and vigilantly watching the new administration's activities.

Mexican Indigenous Communities, Belligerent in the Face of Outside Visions of Development

Mexico's 2020 census reported 7,364,645 people who spoke an indigenous language.[4] In contrast with the United States, our country did sign International Labor Organization

Convention 169, which established that first peoples must enjoy full human and fundamental rights without any obstacles or discrimination. And therefore, in 1992, Mexico's Constitution stated that it is a pluricultural nation. Despite this, Mexican indigenous continue to be marginalized from economic and political development.

For decades, Mexico's first peoples have shown themselves to be deeply distrustful of the state, which is based on the persistent non-fulfillment of their rights. They lack basic health and housing services; they have the highest illiteracy levels and the worst working conditions, which force them to take on risky migration in hostile circumstances. They are victims of violence, land-grabbing, and discrimination and live in conditions of poverty or extreme poverty. Whether by omission or deliberately, the different administrations have continued with the logic of exclusion and discrimination against indigenous groups instead of creating a decent life for them.

As if all that were not enough, in the last five presidential terms (1988-2018), 117,300,000 hectares of land, more than half the nation's territory, have been licensed out for exploitation of natural and energy resources. This has had very high costs for both indigenous communities and the environment: basically, multiple socio-environmental conflicts have erupted, bringing with them the murder of indigenous leaders who were defending their territory and fighting increased water scarcity. Today, a considerable part of the country's indigenous groups, outstanding among which is the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN), do not view what the government calls its Fourth Transformation in a favorable light. Both its social programs and its mega-projects, like the Trans-isthmus Corridor and the Maya Train, are met with hostility by these communities because they are based on a national view of development that does not jibe with the communities' needs; they disregard completely their world view, their knowledge about the land, and their cultural specificities, and do not take into account their forms of organization and therefore, their community structures.

However, it should also be underlined that for decades, the first peoples have given many examples of organization, resistance, and mobilization to safeguard their territories and ways of life. In Chiapas, the EZLN has worked to ensure community autonomy and the construction of their own organizational models. The Yaquis in Sonora began a struggle for water rights; in Chihuahua, the Rará-muri people have faced the destruction of their forests and the invasion of their territories by criminal groups; in Michoacán, the Purépechas from Cherán have battled illegal logging and organized crime; in Guerrero, Canadian mining companies have been confronted by indigenous mobilization; in the northern mountains of Puebla, groups of Nahua have created collectives, held demonstrations, forums, and conferences to fight open-pit mining; in Oaxaca, the Zoque, Chontal, Zapotec, and Ikoot have severely questioned the windfarm projects; in San Luis Potosí, the Wixárika have carried out a long fight to defend their sacred lands from mining companies, and a long etcetera.

First Peoples, Political Actors Reconfiguring Their Surroundings

By defending their territories, cultural identities, and right to self-determination in their own terms, the first peoples of Mexico position themselves as political actors, actively participating in reconfiguring their surroundings. At the same time, they underline the value of a way of life not based on destroying the environment or deepening economic inequality. These experiences remind us that government efforts to include first peoples in national policy, infrastructure projects or development projects must be carried out with their participation, recognizing the authority of traditional knowledge and wisdom in soil and resource management, and incorporating the complexity of their needs. Above all, it is clear that the future of indigenous communities is not to be found in governmental projects, but in their defense of their own existence as sovereign peoples. ⱽM

Notes

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Diego Ignacio Bugeda Bernal*

Great Expectations
The Paradoxes of Virtuality
In the Time of a Pandemic

Though it might seem paradoxical, the COVID-19 pandemic has made us more present than ever in the materiality of the virtual. The digital world already existed before the health emergency, but undoubtedly, its consequences, confinement and the "new normal" among them, sped up that world's development and also made its advantages and disadvantages more visible. We talk to three UNAM experts in information and communication technologies (ICTs) about virtuality, including among other issues, working from home, online classes, distance learning, and streaming. Esmeralda Martínez, Samuel Martínez, and Miriam Olguín all work at the Center for Research on North America and from there have

contributed with their initiatives regarding the good functioning of the forms and methods that Latin America's largest university has developed in the unexpected circumstances currently being universally experienced. They tell us in this interview about their experiences and explain their conceptions of this new "virtual reality."

Diego Ignacio Bugeda (DIB): The lockdowns caused by the COVID-19 pandemic have been the main factor in what may be a radical change in our expectations as people somehow thrown into a new, unknown world that we never wished for, what has been called "the new normal." The so-called ICTs, and, in general, the entire phenomenon commonly known as "virtuality," play a fundamental role in the creation and consolidation of expectations. For that reason, as experts, what do you think of this

* Diego Ignacio Bugeda Bernal is an editor at *Voices of Mexico* and the CISAN; he can be contacted at diebb@unam.mx.

overwhelming transformation in human practices that this new way of life has brought about? Why don't you start, Samuel?

Samuel Martínez (SM): Well, based on what you just said, I think it's important to look at two themes of what's called "virtuality": the exponential rise in information sources and, with that, the emergence of an infodemic and the massive increase in the offering of online services. Broadly speaking, we can analyze this phenomenon in two parts: on the one hand, live transmissions, many of them on demand, in what's been called streaming, which has undergone very rapid, high-impact changes. We've moved from transmitting through video-conferences held in special rooms, with very sophisticated, expensive equipment, to a model of collective communication via computer. Today this is handled mostly through Internet, on platforms and apps that are relatively easy for any user to access and that allow us more independent, flexible, efficient forms of communication, like Zoom, GoogleMeet, or, for educational purposes, Classroom, among the best known.

The second part of this phenomenon is the proliferation of resources, platforms, and software that have emerged to facilitate people's communication and access to information. Undoubtedly, this has decidedly contributed to consolidating the idea of working from home. Of course, platforms like BlueJeans, Zoom, and Skype already existed, but the circumstances that the pandemic created, that of staying and working from home, drove their development and optimized their possibilities. With the pandemic, in fact, a significant number of new platforms and online possibilities for communication emerged, all housed in the cloud. Some of them are very potent and sophisticated, like Jitsi Meet or Microsoft Teams —also very useful in fields like education— and have helped create the expectation that working from home is here to stay.

DIB: A related question, Samuel, about all these technological tools: Do you think that these times of pandemic have accelerated their development *vis-à-vis* how they were advancing before?

SM: Yes, of course, I'm convinced of it. For example, take the case of Teams, a videoconference platform that I've worked with a lot in the last year and a half. I'm very im-

> "With the pandemic, a significant number of new platforms and online possibilities for communication emerged, all housed in the cloud. Some of them are very potent and sophisticated and have helped create the expectation that working from home is here to stay."
> Samuel Martínez

pressed with how it has been updated in very few months; it really changed a lot: they optimized resources for visualization; they introduced innovations to make the sessions more dynamic, etc. And that's just one example, because the majority of the other apps and programs did the same thing, including platforms designed for transmitting and picking up video and audio from other sources. Naturally, this has had a significant impact on technology users, who have had to adapt. I'm sure that many people expected the lockdowns not to last as long as they have. I read somewhere that we've advanced about ten years in the field of digital technology. This of course also brings about a change in the culture of the workplace and in people's ability to adapt. Some software programs have gone through three or four versions this year.

DIB: To establish a little bit of context, Miriam, to understand these changes better, I'd like you to look at the basics and ask you what virtuality is. What are its advantages and disadvantages in the context of the pandemic?

Miriam Olguín (MO): Well, I think that we can define virtuality as the ability to carry out different activities through technology in different contexts without needing to do them in person. What we are experiencing today undoubtedly means an astonishing transformation of the ways we live our daily lives.

Of course, the virtual mode has brought a lot of advantages and disadvantages in all areas of our lives: on the social, political, and economic levels, and, outstandingly, in the field of education, there have been many changes. The same thing has happened regarding the workplace.

I'll look at the advantages first: virtuality offers us opportunities for improving our skills, not necessarily our competencies. For those of us who work on developing ITCs, it's been a challenge, because we've had to incorporate and train everyone in our workplaces, so that

> "Virtuality has also allowed for the creation and improvement of educational platforms, which have increasingly adapted to each individual's educational needs. That is, they have centered on the student, offering him or her more flexible educational resources than just classes."
> Miriam Olguín

they, too, can improve their competencies and technological skills. In addition, this virtual mode has allowed us to innovate in different contexts. In the cultural sphere, for example, today we can have access to places we couldn't have imagined before, like museums. There have also been innovations in the field of work: working online has brought many advantages. Among others, people say that working from home makes for greater productivity. Why? Among other reasons because we save a lot of time used before in transportation: a lot of people took, for example, over two hours to get to work. Also, in a way, working from home has helped us communicate better; this can be seen in social interrelations and, of course, also, in education, where we can see multiple advantages.

For those of us who work in technology, virtuality has also broadened our job opportunities: for software developers, specialists in data mining, in artificial intelligence, in semantic web, in preparing virtual environments, for example, virtual reality, augmented reality. In education it has also brought many benefits, as can be seen with the huge number of online offerings for training and updating. Many of these are from very prestigious institutions and universities, like the UNAM, which have opened up distance-learning for-credit courses. It has also allowed for the creation and improvement of educational platforms, which have increasingly adapted to each individual's educational needs. That is, they have centered on the student, offering him or her more flexible educational resources than just classes.

Now, let's talk about the disadvantages. Regarding work, for example, working hours have gotten longer, which brings us face to face with the need to move ahead with a form of organization that would guarantee established working hours can be fulfilled. With regard to education, in 2005 an important author, Kemly Camacho, had already mentioned that the introduction of new technologies al-

ways brings with it inequalities in opportunities for development among those who have access to them or don't. That is, technological innovation inevitably means the creation of and/or the deepening of digital gaps. In education, with the swift technological transition brought about by the pandemic, many institutions in the sector, many schools, were nowhere near prepared enough to successfully make the changes. They didn't have —and many still don't— the tools required to connect, or the skills or competencies they needed. All this widened the digital gaps.

In the field of education, another obstacle is that teachers have tried to make the traditional virtual. In this new reality, we must be very clear that the new ways of giving classes are very different; it is not a good idea to give them as though we were still in a face-to-face situation. The teaching-learning model that supposed the traditional way of professors imparting knowledge to students has been surpassed. Today, that model is no longer functional and will have to give way to an education centered on the individual needs of each student, an objective to which technology can tribute enormously. To do this, innovation is undoubtedly required in educational processes and curricula, above all in public education. To that end, both institutions and teachers will have to be digitally trained, of course, in the use of new technologies, but also to be able to design educational strategies that can adapt to current models. In fact, in certain educational spaces, like higher education, we'll probably never return completely to in-person teaching.

DIB: Miriam, all these technological advances have been developed due to the need for communication and distance-education and work. So, have they contributed to increasing the digital divide? What does the future hold for us regarding technology and communications?

MO: I can say about this that most studies look at the digital divide in terms of access to technologies, the availability of Internet connectivity, the use of specialized infrastructure, and mobile devices. Other studies also mention other kinds of gaps, such as the use and appropriation gaps, both related to access to knowledge.

Really, the new virtuality and the pandemic had the effect of underlining the digital gaps. According to Mexico's National Institute of Statistics and Geography, in our country, 73 percent of people in urban areas have Inter-

WORKSHOP ON UNAM
STREAMING CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Marvin Meyer / Unsplash.com

A few months before the decision was made to move UNAM academic and outreach services to a virtual environment, a workshop was organized about the best streaming practices. Later, lockdown strengthened it and the workshop has received greater recognition, even beyond academia strictly speaking, to the point that the university's current rector, Enrique Graue Wiechers, decided to support and institutionalize it. Its mission was and still is to construct and maintain a space for analysis, discussion, and the generation of proposals. It also has the aim of creating a network of experts in new technologies from the different university bodies to exchange ideas, information, and propose initiatives to optimize streaming. It focuses above all on the tasks of digital transmission of live events or on the language of the digital media in real time, such as seminars, colloquia, congresses, roundtable discussions, online courses, etc.

Two of the workshop's main creators and promoters, Esmeralda Martínez and Samuel Martínez, from the CISAN Systems Department, tell us about their experience and motivations. They still enthusiastically contribute to keeping this workshop alive, with its periodic sessions . . . naturally, at a distance.

Esmeralda Martínez

- ✔ "The workshop's objective is to share each of its member's experiences about how to improve live transmissions of university events. And even more now that, due to the pandemic, we have to continually update. The workshop members share that knowledge. We meet and report to each other about all our advances. For example, if we find new software or develop a protocol that helps optimize some of the streaming processes. Every member contributes ideas and suggests initiatives to optimize university streaming in different aspects: reducing production time, improving the quality of audio and video recordings in real time, minimizing costs as much as possible, etc."

✔ "The idea of organizing a series of roundtables called 'COVID-19: Reflections from the UNAM' also came out of the workshop. In these roundtables, different experts delved into topics like health, economics, education, the humanities, society, the planet, sports, etc., and what ties them all together is how all these areas were affected by the pandemic. All the contributions and the feedback from the audience were transmitted in real time. It was very stimulating because, in addition to being a success in terms of audience size, the experience was a kind of pilot test of everything we've been discovering and innovating in the workshop."

✔ "The streaming workshop is part of a more ambitious project that the rector's office assigned to the General Office for Information and Communications Technologies, which consists of creating a repository containing the recordings and transmissions of all the UNAM's academic events on an easy-access platform that would have a user-friendly interface for the general public. In short, the goal is to create something like a university YouTube. This is a very ambitious project because it involves many complex technical issues, from the storage of information in servers to the cataloguing and classification of an enormous amount of digital material. The two-year experience we have already had in the streaming workshop lets us make valuable contributions to this huge effort."

Samuel Martínez

✔ "In the workshop, we began to realize that what we generated as video-on-demand, or streaming, is no longer just for students' consumption, but for the community in general. We understood that it's very important to disseminate what the UNAM is doing, and, in the case of Esmeralda and myself, what the CISAN is doing, in the areas of academic dissemination, continuous education, and online education. We do this with tools like Moodle or Classroom, which aren't worked on independently; rather, we mix up all these technologies, which complement each other one way or another, and in those mixtures is where we innovate in the workshop."

✔ "One thing that characterizes what we do in the workshop is that its initiatives are bottom-up; they come from the rank and file, from the technicians and the professionals, not from university authorities."

✔ "Another important aspect we look at is working from home. Above all, we look at the new skills required and the new job descriptions that have emerged, one of which could be 'streaming expert.' These are very specific job profiles that describe people who work in 'virtualization,' people with knowledge about transmitting videoconferences and streaming technologies. There are still few experts in these fields, and so that means that the workshop is also a space for professionalization."

✔ "One of the workshop's strengths is fostering collaborative work and collective solutions. Also, the creation of networks for collaboration, where each one contributes from his or her experience and field of discipline: engineers, graduates in systems, maintenance technicians, experts in communications, and community managers, among others. It's a strength that grows as the networks grow."

✔ "One of our very satisfactory achievements was multi-streaming, or the simultaneous use of all our social networks and all our digital communications media. Then later, that transformed into something known as 'broadcasts,' that is, the generation of signals that travel all over the Internet, that go out to the whole world."

"The principle of virtuality was almost always thought of as something positive; but now we've been able to see that it also implies lots of problems that have to be considered, that it has its negative side that we have to face up to and change. We have to find an appropriate balance with in-person activity."
Esmeralda Martínez

net access, compared to only 46 percent in rural areas. We're talking about approximately 50 million people in Mexico who still don't have connectivity. The pandemic also made us realize the enormous gaps in use and appropriation. What are those? Broadly speaking, this means the user can't really utilize the technologies; that is, he or she can't carry out the basic activities required for their reflexive, innovative use. However, we can also say that one of the advantages of the pandemic and the incorporation of virtuality in our lives has been that they've forced us to acquire these skills and knowledge.

With regard to the future, a widely recognized specialist in technology, Marc Vidal, defines the stages that technology will necessarily have to go through. He holds that in the next very few years, virtual reality and augmented reality will be incorporated into education. The question is what we professionals in technologies are doing to train future users. What are we doing to be able to contribute to reducing the gaps that today seem to be continuing to grow?

DIB: One last question, Miriam. Can we say that professionals in technology, who previously worked with software, machines, and processes, are now going to work also with people?

MO: Well, in fact, we've always worked with people. Let's say that virtuality has its shades of gray. This has pushed us to orient and train users more so that they can acquire the minimum competencies and skills they need in handling these new technologies. We've also dedicated more of our time to online group activities, to online events, to servicing people on line. Yes, these are totally different practices from those we were used to, but they've always been with people. Of course, certain complications have arisen because so-called digital immigrants, people who have had to adapt to the use of technologies almost from the beginning and are very accustomed to their in-person activities, have more trouble with this. But, at the end of the day, we've moved ahead without huge problems. Of course, teachers most frequently still give classes on line as though they were in person, but every day, more and more of them introduce innovations and get more out of the infinite possibilities offered by digital technologies. The idea is to get knowledge to students at any given time, by diverse means —for example, audio recordings

Andrew Neel / Unsplash.com

on Spotify, tutorials on YouTube, etc.— and go online just to clear up doubts and offer advisory services about what they've learned. That, in my opinion, is educational innovation.

DIB: Esmeralda, perhaps you could conclude by telling us about what daily life looks like in this era of forced virtuality.

Esmeralda Martínez (EM): Sure, Diego. As a professional in the field of technology, as the mother of children in two different grades, primary and high school, and, taking into consideration each person's individual characteristics, I've been able to observe the psychological consequences of the pandemic. Beyond just changing from in-person to virtual, in the field of education, students have also been affected. It's not the same to see your fellow students in little boxes on a screen as to have physical contact. Sure, people's personalities have a lot to do with this. For example, for some university researchers, it's been relatively easy to adapt to the new technologies, while others resist the change, or just freeze up. We're immersed in a process of changing mentalities, changing paradigms.

The divide that Miriam was talking about isn't just digital and knowledge-linked; it's also socio-economic. For example, if families like mine, with only two children, have a hard time investing in two devices, you can just imagine what happens in homes with large families, or in places where two or more families live together. The same thing happens with access and the quality of Internet service.

DIB: They seem to have thrown us into the deep end before we know how to swim.

EM: Exactly. That metaphor is very apt. The problem is that that also happened to teachers, both in public and private schools, on all educational levels, including our university. There was no order to it, no general strategy, or standardized method designed and regulated by educational authorities. Instead, every school jumped into the pool and did what it could; they held onto the tools they had at hand like they were lifesavers.

Virtuality has forced us ICT professionals to be creative. We no longer need the sophisticated equipment of a few years ago, for example, for videoconferences. With just a single device with a camera and a microphone, we can do a whole lot, almost everything we used to do before with very expensive equipment. Sure, the rapid development of the platforms and distance communications programs has also helped. I agree that in eighteen months we've advanced what used to take ten years.

DIB: Another important issue is that now, with virtuality, users and employees, not institutions or companies, are having to pay the costs. Each one of us pays those costs in order to keep our jobs.

EM: In fact, the principle of virtuality was almost always thought of as something positive; but now we've been able to see that it also implies lots of problems that have to be considered, that it has its negative side that we have to face up to and change. We have to find an appropriate balance with in-person activity; we may be barely at the beginning of the effort to fully understand this phenomenon. That's why I see these changes as a virtual and technological revolution, because they involve multiple aspects: the personal, job-related, economic, social, and cultural. It's a digital revolution.

DIB: And, like with all initial stages of revolutions, we can also see chaos in this one. We'll have to remain vigilant about where this new virtuality heads, and see if it's up to the expectations it has generated or if it'll be like so many other revolutions that have ended in disappointment. Thanks to the three of you for sharing your ideas and the time you've invested in this virtual interview. **VM**
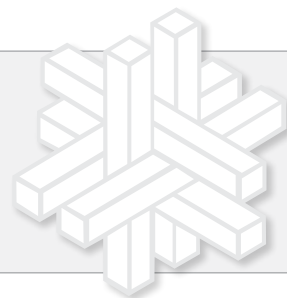
Secret Alphabet 2.

Fernando Gálvez de Aguinaga*

ROJO
The Creator's Geometric Rain

Mexico under the Rain 4.

It rains. The listless rain gives off
the scent of an insipid, icy flower.
The day is long and sad. One understands
That death is like this... that life is like this.

It rains still. The day is sad and long.
The self sinks in remote gray.
It rains... And still, one hopes
The rain never ends.

Fragment of *Olas grises* (Gray Waves),
a poem by Leopoldo Lugones

The rain of geometry fell around him, and the bricks extruding from the corners of his Coyoacán studio façade painted a canvas with the afternoon's play of light and shadow —a piece of his own authorship. It was almost as if Vicente Rojo stood at the edge of his painting, as if his anatomy, cloaked in a sweater with blue and yellow rhombuses, were just another stroke of the brush in that big, geometric painting whose architecture he'd designed with his accomplice, architect Felipe Leal. That's how I met Vicente Rojo in 1993, surrounded by his almost kaleidoscopic visual imagination. It was the early 1990s and I was a young reporter who had already held dozens of books whose covers the maestro had designed. I already admired his editorial work; writing on his sculptures and paintings already existed; and I'd found his work in museums, galleries, magazines, and newspapers. I felt like the fact that he was named after his uncle —a staunch military man who had led the Republican armed forces in the Spanish Civil War— had come out of a storybook. I tried to understand his early life —how the war in Spain had erupted and how his father suddenly had to leave for Mexico in exile, given

that his brother was a leader in the Republican resistance against Franco and his fascist cronies. How had a child who had grown up amid so much chaos become such a generous and orderly artist? If Vicente Rojo's sober personality gave off anything, it was a sense of generosity and serenity —something I also found in his prints and paintings. That first meeting was like a spring of revelations. His answers to my questions went beyond what I avidly jotted down in my notebook. They were in the row of four or five easels lined up in his studio, in the clean, impeccable paintbrushes beside the canvas he was working on, in the garden sculptures, in the stairway climbing up to the second floor like a drawing —everything seemed to be replying to my questions while Don Vicente shared stories of his nostalgia for his father, his journey to Mexico, his friendships, what he'd learned from the journalist Fernando Benítez, and how the cultural supplements in newspapers would ultimately help consolidate him as a designer, while those same journalistic spaces ended up being fertile ground for the lush friendships he cultivated through intellectual and emotional bonds.

While Vicente Rojo told me about his nation's pain, the people he missed, the precariousness of armed conflict, historic injustices, but also about certain sense of commitment, solidarity, and

intellectual integrity, I suddenly understood that his work embodied a persistent quest for order. These expressions emanated from someone whose daily existence had been utterly turbulent, with family qualms and the tensions of ideological persecution hitting close to home. In his work, as he attempted to organize a book or compose a piece of art within the four edges of a canvas, what he sought was to create an orderly universe. Thus, as Vicente told me about his war-torn childhood, I understood how his quest for freedom had found an orderly route to happiness in his creative discipline and geometric compositions. In his fabulous book *Puntos suspensivos, escenas de un autorretrato* (Ellipsis: Scenes from a Self Portrait), published by the National College (*El Colegio Nacional*), Maestro Rojo looks back on a photograph of when he first arrived in Mexico: at age 18, he was photographed painting at the Pyramid of the Sun in Teotihuacan. Perhaps this first incursion into painting Mexico's landscapes was really a harbinger of his path toward geometry. The pyramids towering amid the natural landscape were lessons in the metaphor of architecture: the mountains as sacred spaces would appear geometrically translated, as the natural landscape's organic curves became shapes. Years later, Vicente Rojo's artistic aesthetic ended up translating life —pushing its wilderness and natural phenomena into dominant lines and triangles, and into the pure shapes of the square, the triangle, and the circle, much like the masters of the legendary Bauhaus did in their predominantly abstract proposals.

As Vicente told me about his war-torn childhood, I understood how his quest for freedom had found an orderly route to happiness in his creative discipline and geometric compositions.

From 1919 to 1933, Bauhaus artists and ideas elevated graphic and industrial design into professional careers, significantly influencing Vicente Rojo's ideas, as he mentioned in that first interview I did in 1993. Besides Klee and Kandinsky, color theory, the emergence of universal fonts in the printing world, photographic and photomontage exploration in graphic design, the renovation of museography and industrial design, and the concept of housing for workers also made their mark on Rojo. He fed off the creative and intellectual revolution at the heart of the Weimar Republic, but like he said, the revolution reached him through Mexico's cultural scene, through discussions at soirées and newspapers, manifestos, exhibitions, and lectures. Rojo viewed Paul Klee as artistic kin —he liked emphasizing how close to his heart he kept these influences and ties. Don Vicente spoke about how Mexico's youth —including himself— suddenly took up the fight for abstract art, following the most forward-thinking people of his generation. He had his own position within abstrac-
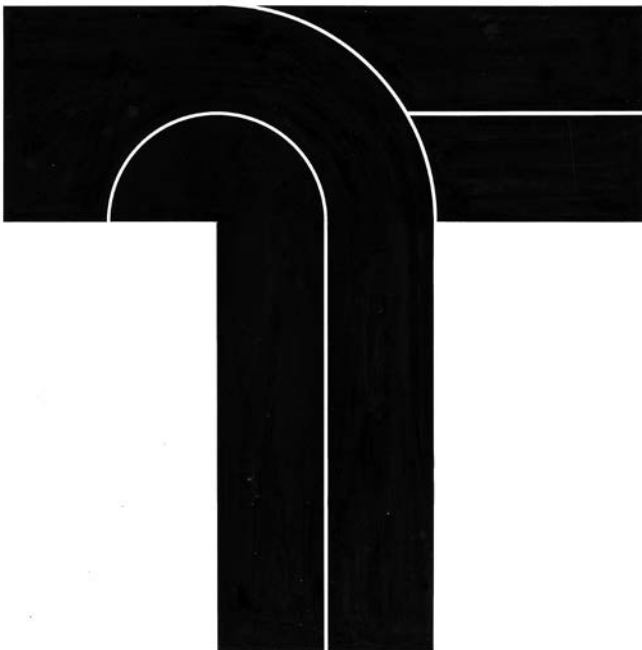
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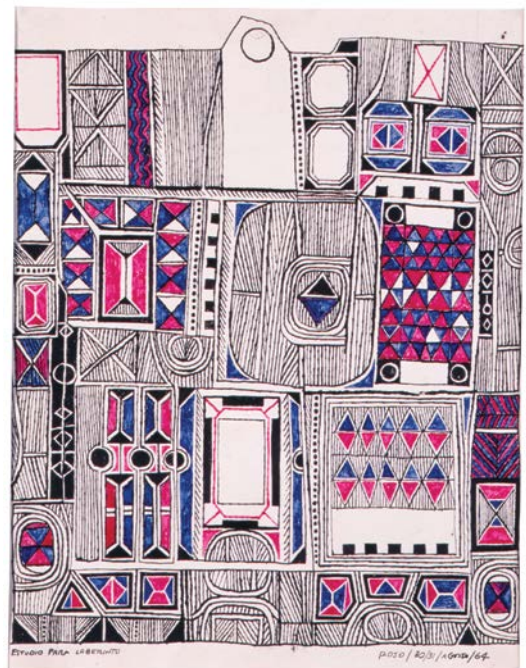
Study for *The Labyrinth 7.*

tionism, with geometry taken to the extreme and explored through thousands of varieties and nuances. Thus, when I first saw him immersed in the geometry of his work, before his studio's façade, I felt like I was seeing him amid this other world in which he was a creator, a world that had marked my vision, in which a Mexico City was enclosed in Vicente's visual prism where the rain never stopped. I'd like to cite a phrase from his self-portrait: "I see geometry as 'second nature' because it supports us; without it, there'd be no doors, no chairs, no wheels." There also would be no paintings framed within the four edges of a canvas, nor rectangular or square books housing lives and landscapes, nor the variations in Vicente Rojo's prints and paintings. I still remember the time I organized an exhibition of his graphic series *Volcanes* (Volcanoes) at the Institute for Graphic Art in Oaxaca (IAGO), in 2005. He told me about how Paul Westheim's writing decidedly impacted his approach to geometry, both giv-

Vicente Rojo's revolution changed history through his sensibility, and the rain of his refracted light and colorful triangles remains in his prints, lithographs, and silkscreens.

Extinct Volcano 2.

en his texts on artists like Klee, Kandinsky, and other avant-garde artists from Europe, and because of his perspective on pre-Hispanic art. When we spoke at his Coyoacán studio before the Oaxacan exhibition in 2005, I reminded him of that famous letter from former Bauhaus students and teachers, Joseph and Annie Albers, to Kandinsky, in which they somewhat rejected Breton's surrealist appropriation of Mexico, telling the Russian master that "Mexico is truly the promised land of abstract art." "Why, yes, they were right," Don Vicente replied, "but, for the record, it was my dear friend, the marvelous gallerist Antonio Souza, who taught me the inextricable relationship and influence between two or more colors on a canvas —and he also taught Toledo; we'll ask him about that in Oaxaca soon enough."

When I delved into this genius's art at age nineteen or twenty, I'd already been trained in graphic design, and I'd read Pacheco and Monsiváis's books, which were printed by ERA publishing house, with their front covers created by their dear friend; and I'd read the cultural supplements in the magazine *Siempre* (Always), and the *Uno más Uno* (One Plus One) and *Novedades* (News) dailies, which my father piled up like treasures —treasures I'd devour on the most fruitful, sleepless nights of my youth. Gabriel García Márquez, Octavio Paz, and José Revueltas would mark my life with their poetics, and their titles were often published in books whose front covers had been designed by Maestro Rojo. Over the years, my generation became almost unconsciously imbibed with the mastery of his brushstrokes and publishing ideas. Rojo founded ERA in 1960, giving Mexico's best intellectual ideas an editorial home. But he built his practice across several spaces, including newspapers, magazines, and more. We could understand ERA as the living room to his graphic house, but he also participated in many of the most important print workshops of the time, creating his portfolios (*carpetas*) alongside the classical print masters of his generation, but also with older and younger printers like Emilio Payán. In these spaces, young designers like Alejandro Magallanes, and older ones like Rafael López Castro, had the chance to have Rojo's advice and open-ended conversation. Rojo's way of conceptualizing books, newspaper covers, headlines, and logos seeped into our everyday lives. We ate up the news for breakfast, peering at the headline in the *Jornada* newspaper, taking in the paper's logo and first text box, its first few supplements . . . In Oaxaca, many of the logos for Francisco Toledo's institutions, like the Handmade Paper Workshop and the Museum of Contemporary Art (MACO), among others, were donated by Vicente Rojo. Likewise, we could mention Mexico City's Londres bookstore, as well as private gallery spaces like Juan Martín, museums like the National Museum of Art (MUNAL), and other companies.

The Warrior.

His work at the *Revista de la Universidad* (University Magazine) boasted a markedly avant-garde aesthetic in the style of the 1960s and 1970s, sometimes influenced by pop, minimalism, and even psychedelia. If we pulled out an LP record with the voice of a celebrated poet from the UNAM's Voz viva collection, the album cover would be the product of his graphic sensibility, which went beyond design, created with the poetry and literature that would enter his mind and transform into a simultaneously aesthetic and functional piece, in which the letters, the image, and color emanated from an expressive and informative strategy that marked our lives.

Then his work took over the public space, with sculptures on Miguel Ángel de Quevedo Avenue, a fountain for the building Ricardo Legorreta built for the Ministry of Foreign Relations (SRE), and the Anti-Mural at the National Center for the Arts (CENART), to name a few, transforming our relationship to the street and to public buildings by making them more than mere spaces to get through red tape, get in line to see a show, or walk to a bookstore.

His pieces opened to letting the spectator build the piece with her own experience and were more suggestive than determined, opening fantastic universes within the everyday —in intimacy and on the street. Through his three-dimensional work, the dialogue between architecture and urban engineering seemed almost natural. Vicente has the last name of a leftist —Rojo, or Red— and came to our country when General Cárdenas opened the doors to the marvelous personalities of the Spanish exile community, who would ultimately make Mexico complete. Families came in waves, and our nation received art, lectures, science, and the intellectual, economic, and political work that helped build much of the best that Mexico has to offer. Vicente Rojo's revolution changed history through his sensibility, and the rain of his refracted light and colorful triangles remains in his prints, lithographs, and silkscreens, and in the indigenous-style collages he made with cut-up *amate* bark paper, with infinite squares still ruling this creative downpour, whose rain will never cease. VM

The Playfulness Behind
GABRIELA GONZÁLEZ LEAL'S Art

Wings, 2021 (commemorative bill for the centennial of the Mexican Constitution / five peso bill, Mexico, 1963).

Benched, 2019 (lithograph, prismacolor, and acrylic on paper).

There's nothing better than a metaphor to describe Gabriela González Leal's art. Teeter-tottering in time, her art interprets the society we live in. The past is no longer the time behind us, nor is it a nostalgic, lost paradise: it's the ability to transcend the violence and pain that has marked our time to generate a new outlook that might not be idyllic, but is still encouraging.

Voices of Mexico (VM): Your work clearly has impetus. What is this artistic impulse anchored in?
Gabriela González Leal (GGL): My artistic motivation comes from the everyday. This vital impulse is what gets me up in the morning, every morning. To me, creation is a vessel that allows me to say and express everything I think and feel. Currently, my art is situated in something I'd call play. Starting with the pandemic, I began playing and letting loose in order to find the freest forms. Before, I used to limit myself by saying, "If this isn't art, I'd better not do it." I let myself flow and started discovering materials and playing with them, with their textures, with ideas. The result is a coming and going, where I grab onto a thread to weave deeper ideas together.

VM: Like which?
GGL: I started my series "Héroes" (Heroes) by intervening old, Mexican bills to create small, sculpture-like silhouettes alluding to newsworthy events in which children are made invisible or are victims of violence. Subsequently, the idea for the series "Dioses" (Gods) emerged from "Heroes," since it also involved deconstructing toys: I intervened soccer balls to create masks akin to those of the ancient gods. Another piece, *El patio de mi casa* (The Patio in My House)

All photos are courtesy of the artist.

consists of a series of garments created with various materials to tailor our identity through traditional games.[1] The idea tying these three projects together is children being made invisible and the violence they suffer, all using the concept of play.

VM: Why play? Why playfulness?

GGL: I use play as a process of symbolic creation to represent reality. In a playful space, I can talk about these problems indirectly, without having to name certain horrors, like violence, child labor, feminicide, and the abuse of young girls. This playful field has allowed me to be more subtle and address issues from the stance of the material. For instance, intervening soccer balls and having girls don pre-Hispanic masks is a way of not biasing the public, but of revisiting my ancestors and roots through play, transposing themselves to the present moment.

VM: Directly addressing some of the issues that children face could be too much to bear. The army of child soldiers and child day-laborers come to mind.

GGL: Of course, and that's not what interests me. What I'm trying to do is to emphasize children's innocence and the need to safeguard childhood, because if we don't, we'll be facing a very uncertain future. To me, childhood is a symbol of the keystone, the beginning, a starting point that we must care for and cherish. We need to remember our roots and our past so that history doesn't keep repeating itself.

> **"In a playful space, I can talk about these problems indirectly, without having to name certain horrors, like violence, child labor, feminicide, and the abuse of young girls."**

No Admittance, 2020 (five Bolivar note, Venezuela, 1985).

Calakmul, 2020 (art object and photo log).

Argentinean Child with Mask III, 2019
(child's mask made with soccer balls; digital photo).

Child's Mask II, 2019 (unused soccer ball and string).

VM: So, do you see the future in the origin?

GGL: Totally. I mean, I believe we have to preserve a lot of things —for instance, right now, I'm revisiting our ancestors' positive conceptions of life and childhood. While it's true that children were sometimes sacrificed for certain purposes, these acts did mean something —they were meant to secure the harvest and food—; plus, children were compared to precious creatures, like birds with gorgeous feathers. I aim to recover these symbols and the great value that our ancestors saw in children, unlike nowadays, when today's sacrifices —killing them, involving them in drug dealing and violence, or abusing girls— are absurd and unprecedented. They make no sense: violence is becoming so blatant, so mainstream, that seeing a dead child is something we've normalized.

VM: How has the pandemic impacted you?

GGL: In every sense. At the personal level, it completely changed my perception of death —an idea I used to perceive as distant. At the beginning, the lockdown didn't affect me much because I'm a very solitary person and spend a lot of time working at my studio, but with the pandemic, it's not that you don't want to go out, but that you can't, because it's dangerous. Seeing the empty streets, with news of illness and death, made me feel a certain hollowness and a sense of uncertainty in the face of a rather disturbing future. Nonetheless, this very uncertainty pushed me to start to free myself from constraints and to experiment. I believe that, during this time, my work has progressed quite a bit, in many ways, not just conceptually, but also in terms of materials; there's plenty of work underway. From the creative point of view, the pandemic catalyzed change in lots of artists; some colleagues I've spoken to have mentioned that their works have taken significant turns.

> **"Seeing the empty streets, with news of illness and death, made me feel a certain hollowness and a sense of uncertainty in the face of a rather disturbing future. Nonetheless, this very uncertainty pushed me to start to free myself from constraints and to experiment."**

Indigenous Little Girls across from the Juárez Semicircle Monument, 2020 (10 peso bill, Mexico 1967).

Child Laborers, 2020 (one peso bill, Mexico 1967).

VM: Do you think we'll be different after this, or will we be overcome with amnesia until the next catastrophe or the next collective tragedy?

GGL: I recently saw the Chilean movie *Machuca*. It's about a couple of kids who live in very different situations: one lives comfortably, while his friend lives precariously. And that's when you realize that history keeps repeating itself. Unfortunately, I don't think much will change. You might change individually, but then you realize the streets are still covered in trash; people keep killing and mugging other people. I think we'll end up the same, or worse. After the lockdown, you're suddenly free and you hanker for lots of things. I don't think we'll see a better future.

VM: Perhaps for the children?

GGL: They're the future. If we don't educate them, if we don't teach them and give them a certain awareness so that the future will change, if we keep mistreating them and exploiting them, then there won't be a future, because we won't be able to change it. They'll have to forge their own path, which is why it's important to give them a healthy childhood that can unfold in peace. We always say we want the pandemic to leave us to something good, but, personally, I don't believe in humanity much. We're not doing well as a society, but at least individually I hope that this experience will leave us something that resonates positively in societies across the world, but there's deep uncertainty ahead. **VM**

▼
Notes

1 My House's Patio is a traditional childhood game still played in kindergartens. In this project, the patio is the artist's environment, and her home is the country. [Editors' Note.]

Luciana Sánchez Fernández*

The Future Of Mexican Art Galleries

Today, art galleries are spaces for more than sales alone. Galleries have become benchmarks of artistic innovation, fostering experimentation while bringing artists, collectors, and curators together. Fortunately, the idea of the gallery as an exclusive niche has lost some of its sway. The doors are more open to the general public than ever before, enriching the cultural agendas of cities across the globe.

* Luciana promotes contemporary art and coordinates Proyecto H Gallery; she can be contacted at lucianasanchezfernandez@gmail.com.

Operating an art gallery involves every stage of the artistic piece: its exhibition, conservation, publicizing, and commercialization. The gallery stands as an institution that can endow artistic creations with symbolic and monetary value. Galleries have been involved in the market from their beginnings, leading them
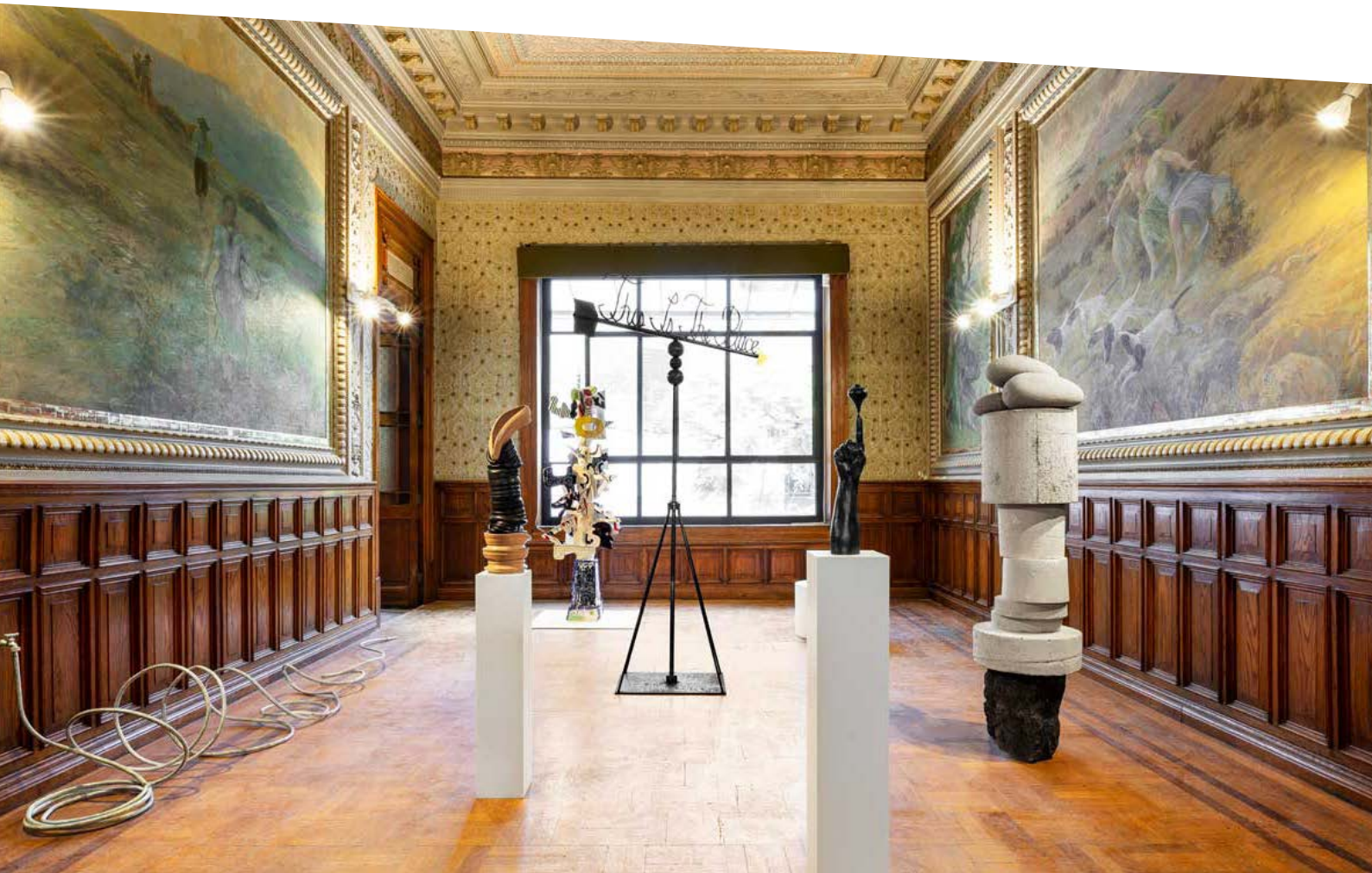
Versalles House Project 2021.

to become the highly globalized industry we know today. Four main roads lead to foreign markets: the flagships that galleries open abroad; art fairs gathering a multitude of international galleries and collectors; digital platforms allowing for online catalogues and sales; and auction houses, which set the prices for the global market. Most galleries are connected to this network, regardless of their location. One way or another, the sales and exchanges that unfold at the most relevant fairs and auctions influence how galleries strategize and present their art all over the world —with a constant eye on the market, which reflects the aesthetic interests and demands of our day.

New York, London, and Hong Kong are the great centers of contemporary art. Mexico is classified as an emerging market within the MINT group (Mexico, Indonesia, Nigeria, and Turkey) and is also part of the strongest bloc in Latin America, the BMC, made up of Brazil, Mexico, and Colombia.[1] As such, it would be fair to say that Mexico houses the right conditions to stimulate the growth of galleries and the contemporary art market.

Consuming Art

Traditionally, galleries have been conceived as spaces exclusive to curators, collectors, buyers, and artists. However, they are now opening their doors to a broader public, through programs and ideas aimed at students, spectators, professionals, and basically anyone interested in exhibitions, regardless of whether they intend to buy. This means the gallery can now be considered a museum-like space.

In Mexico, a myriad of initiatives aim to open galleries to the broader public, including Gallery Weekend (GW), an international

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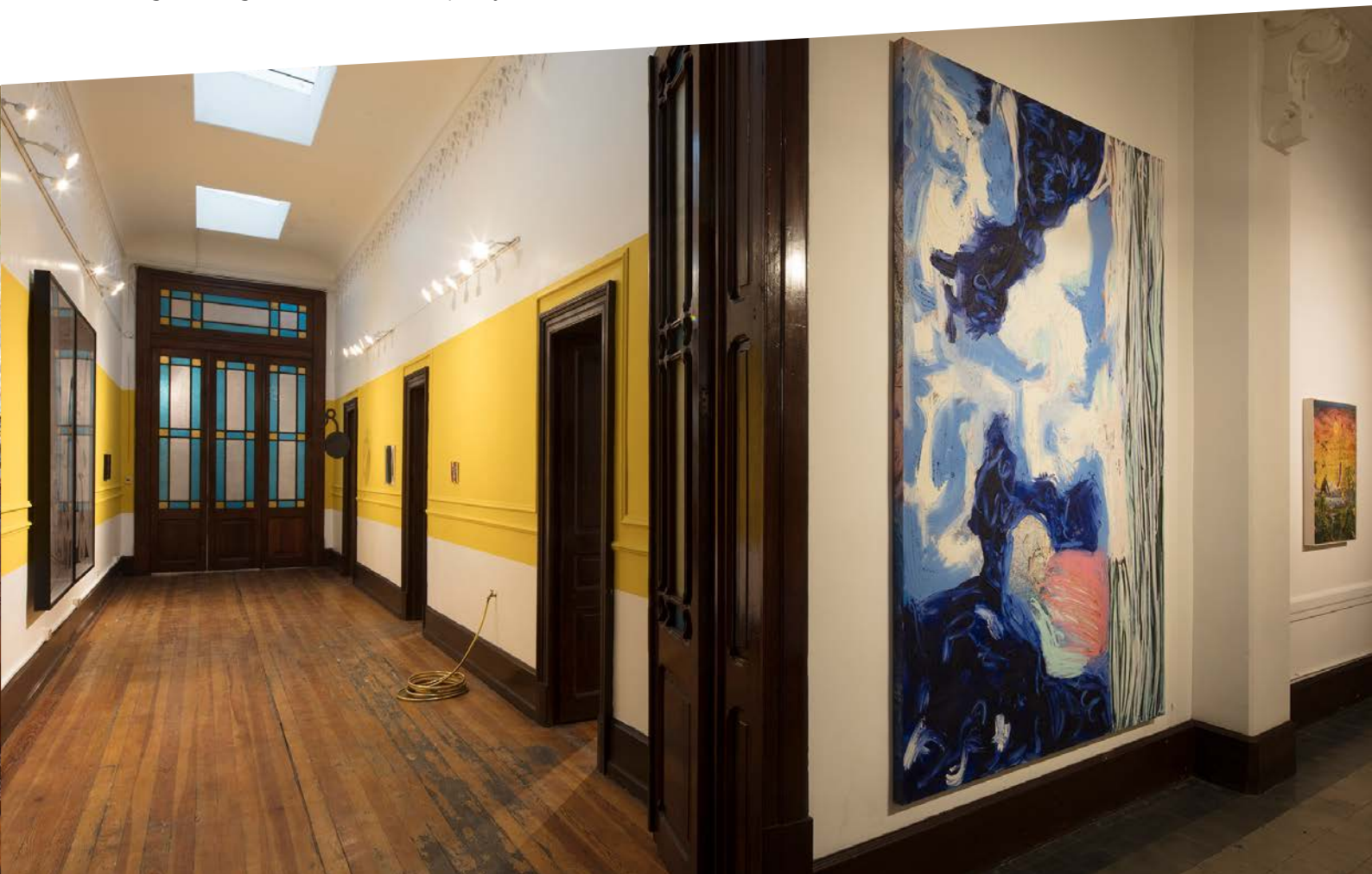
Versalles House Project 2021.
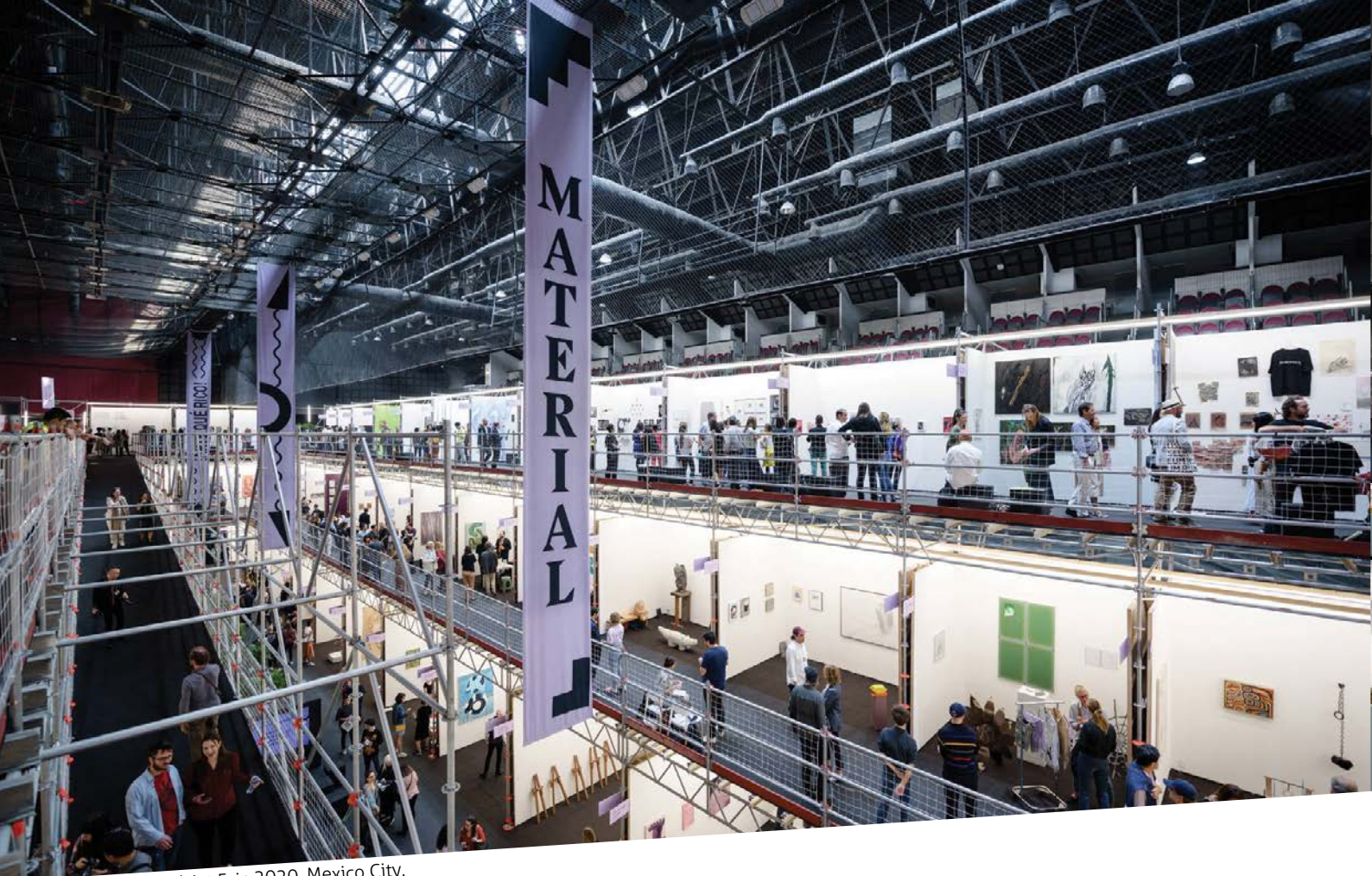
Material Art Fair, 2020, Mexico City.

organization that has spread to more than twenty cities around the world. In Mexico, *Código* magazine first promoted GW in 2013 as a way of revamping Mexico's art scene. Through an open call, galleries in Mexico City sign up for the program and open their doors to the public for four days a year, and GW organizes tours and publicizes the programs, activities, conferences, performances, and debates taking place at each gallery. Though the event is directed at art critics and collectors, a broader, more diverse public visits the galleries than the rest of the year.

These strategies help dissipate the idea that galleries are exclusive spaces, pushing the galleries themselves to consider art consumption more broadly.

The sales and exchanges that unfold at the most relevant fairs and auctions influence how galleries strategize and present their art all over the world —with a constant eye on the market, which reflects the aesthetic interests and demands of our day.

Art Collecting and Local Talent

Art collecting can be organized in two broad categories: institutions such as museums and foundations, and private commercial corporations. Both flock to auction houses to acquire art and expand their collections. At the global level, 80 percent of all auction sales take place at the two great auction houses, Sotheby's and Christie's. Mexico isn't home to any well-known auction houses of comparable size, pushing local museums and collectors hoping to make bids for pieces to look outside the country.

Museums generally have yearly budgets to acquire new pieces, many of which they find at auction houses. In Mexico, government museums and institutions don't have the budget to constantly buy art and expand their permanent collections; thus, most of their budget goes toward temporary exhibitions. These circumstances —among others— have stopped Mexico's art market from becoming as prolific as those of other countries.

When institutions, governments, and foundations invest in local artists, they almost automatically boost sales at the galleries representing them. This influx yields parallel growth in the public and private sector. This strategy has already been implemented in China, a country considered emergent in the art market that

has seen rapid growth over the last few years, as institutions and collectors in China now mainly purchase local art. This has sparked growth in two major market sectors: fairs and auctions. SH Contemporary, a Shanghai art fair, now stands among the most important in Asia, alongside Art Hong Kong, while the world's greatest auction house, Christie's, has turned to the Chinese market and struck an alliance with the auction house Forever China,[2] making this country a sales hub for Asian art.

In Mexico we've seen investments in the careers of our greatest artists, such as Gabriel Orozco, Abraham Cruz-Villegas, and Carlos Amorales, among others. Veracruz-born Gabriel Orozco is represented by the Mexican gallery Kurimanzutto, which has seen plenty of growth in recent years and even opened a flagship gallery in New York in 2018. In 2006, Mexico's government bought the piece *Mátrix Movil* (Mobile Matrix),[3] an 11.69-meter whale skeleton intervened by the artist with black paint, for Mex$3 million. This piece now hangs in the middle of Mexico City's Vasconcelos Library, a space that exhibits itinerant pieces of contemporary Mexican art.

However, these types of funds and purchases should not only go to high-profile Mexican artists, but also to mid-career, emerging ones as a way of supporting local talent. In general, Mexican galleries should promote the careers of Mexican artists so that they may keep on exhibiting and publicizing their work. If artists can develop in their own countries, international success will naturally follow.

Digital Platforms

While the digital art market has operated for a couple of decades now, it has boomed in recent years with the expansion of the Internet. One of the most used digital spaces for art sales and purchases is Artsy.net, a digital platform housing inventories from galleries all around the world that want to sell their pieces online. Artsy has upheld its reputation by implementing quality requirements and standards for the galleries on the platform, building trust with collectors who want to make purchases there.

In 2020, given the COVID-19 pandemic, Artsy's use and sales registered a threefold increase over previous years as galleries and fairs closed or operated at lower capacity. Digital spaces not only help galleries sell art; some platforms directly support artists, such as Saatchi Art, developed by Saatchi Gallery in London.

Several art fairs have forged digital publicity alliances with Artsy, including Mexico's Zsona Maco. The fact that Mexican galleries and fairs are joining spaces like Artsy and its competitor Art Net has amplified their presence beyond the events *per se*, reaching an international audience.

Digital platforms not only foster art sales, but can also generate collection archives for exhibitions, promotion, and conservation. Clearly, galleries should invest in digital platforms for the future, considering digital investment, management, and expansion.

International Fairs

Switzerland's Art Basel is the world's most important international art fair. Launched in 1970, it expanded in such a way that, today, it is in charge of presenting an annual market report on global art. The fair expanded with the inauguration of Art Miami in 2000 and Art Hong Kong in 2010. Given the COVID-19 pandemic, in-person activities at Art Hong Kong and Art Miami 2020 were cancelled, and the fair unfolded digitally. A digital platform allowed for 3D visualizations, with high-quality registers for each

The future of contemporary art galleries in Mexico holds great promise, but support and alliances among institutions, sponsors, and collectors are fundamental to securing investments for Mexican artists and expanding art spaces.

piece, as lectures, interviews, and roundtable discussions streamed on video.

In Mexico, cultural events were held in person throughout the pandemic, but with controlled lesser capacity. So, the Mexican galleries selected for the 2020 edition of Art Miami came together to share an in-person stand in Mexico City. These galleries not only participated digitally, but also held exhibitions at a Porfiriato-era (1876–1911) home in the Juárez neighborhood so that local collectors could physically appreciate the pieces. This gallery alliance supported by the fair's committee emerged as a unique response to the pandemic. Their success was such that galleries adopted the same strategy for the 2021 Art Basel.

▾ Gabriel Orozco, *Mobile Matrix*, Vasconcelos Library, Mexico City.

Esene Hernández / Cuartoscuro

Zona Maco, 2019, Mexico City.

In Mexico, the most awaited fair of the year is Zsona Maco, created by Zélika García in 2002. In early 2020, more than 120 galleries from 22 countries participated. The following edition saw pandemic-related changes. While the fair adopted a digital format, it exclusively invited national galleries to open their doors to in-person activity for five days. The fair operated like Gallery Weekend, with visitors walking from one Mexico City gallery to the next. Maco's choice to promote collaboration between Mexico City galleries and those elsewhere in Mexico, so that they could share spaces with two exhibitions happening at the same time, was among its greatest successes.

Participating in a fair requires heavy investments from galleries, which in turn meticulously select their artists and pieces. By presenting their best proposals, the fair aims to make the greatest possible impact in a span of four to five days. This is why institution directors, museum representatives, and collectors tend to buy art and launch collaborations at these events, aware that each gallery is only presenting its top proposals.

In 2013, two independent art fairs were inaugurated in Mexico City: the Material Art Fair and Salón ACME. Both fairs bring together established and emerging galleries, which guarantees a wide range of prices. This is significant, as young collectors and people interested in starting their collections have an opportunity to do so at these spaces.

FAMA Monterrey is the first independent art fair in northern Mexico. It sets itself apart by making art purchases more accessible —one of its requirements is for prices to top off at Mex$60,000.

Interestingly, this fair also invites artists directly, without requiring gallery representation, as opposed to Zsona Maco and Material Art Fair, which exclusively invite galleries.

Fairs not only boost art purchases, but also help publicize artists and promote collaboration between galleries and institutions. Thus, it is imperative that sponsors push these proposals and that galleries and host cities promote gallery visits.

The future of contemporary art galleries in Mexico holds great promise, but support and alliances among institutions, sponsors, and collectors are fundamental to securing investments for Mexican artists and expanding art spaces. It is important to understand that Mexican galleries not only compete for artists and collectors, they also value collaboration and mutual support. We need to strengthen and continue our parallel activities in order to keep galleries open to experimentation, with spaces rich in local talent. VM

▼
Notes

1 Jos Hackforth-Jones and Iain Robertson, eds., *Art Business Today: 20 Key Topics* (London: Lund Humphries, 2017).
2 EFE, "La casa de subastas Christie's entra en el gran mercado chino," *El mundo*, 2005, https://www.elmundo.es/elmundo/2005/10/30/cultura/1130710271.html.
3 INFOBAE, "Gabriel Orozco: el artista de los millones que cambiará el rostro de Chapultepec," 2019, https://www.infobae.com/america/cultura-america/2019/04/02/gabriel-orozco-el-artista-de-los-millones-que-cambiara-el-rostro-de-chapultepec/.

CAPTIVE CHILDHOOD

Alejandro Paniagua Anguiano*
Illustrated by Martín Pech**

Seated on the rug, Alfonso plays. He shudders at his own imagination.

The boy snaps open the second-to-last of his matryoshka dolls but finds a rescue note instead of the smallest doll, the one he likes the most —with the black dress embellished with thirteen red flowers, crimson cheeks taking up half her face, and lips painted on so precisely that she always seems to be blowing a kiss.

The frightened little boy reads the note warning him that Svetlana Patrovna will only return if he cooperates and doesn't talk to any officials or G.I. Joes, and especially not to any toy soldiers. Alfonso can feel the training wheels being yanked from his heart —now teetering and tottering as it seeks out some father figure who might help, right before crashing hopelessly against the floor.

The tot shakes his chewing-gum-filled cell phone and trills his lips to make the sound of a ringing phone.

He picks up.

Someone tells him he's got to hand over 13 million dollars in cash if he wants to see Svetlana Patrovna again. The boy doesn't say a word, but, in his mind, he can hear the cries of all the wailing dolls in the world.

He's paralyzed for a full hour, stiff as a Barbie's lifeless eyes, tense as the flaxen hair on a Playmobil toy.

An envelope with ribbons printed along the borders is delivered to the room. Inside, there's a card with the birthday wishes scratched out. Instructions for the handover have been scribbled next to the chocolate-cake illustration, and there's a bunch of red splintered wood glued to the card. The kidnapper scratched off one of Svetlana's cheeks and sent the scrapings.

The boy gives in.

 * Alejandro is a writer and poet; he can be contacted at @APaniagua_.
** Martín is a visual artist; he can be contacted at @martípech8.

He pulls out the Monopoly bills that haven't been lost over the years.

There aren't enough.

He'll have to get the rest of the money from his *Turista Mundial* board game.

He ekes out the total.

He places the money in a Spiderman lunchbox, makes his way to the bathroom, and leaves the ransom inside. With an awful pain in his stomach, the youngster returns to his room.

The minutes and hours go by. The paper planes go by. A trash truck goes by. The X Men on the television screen (his favorite cartoon) go by. A real plane goes by. His stomachache is now gone, too.

Alfonso heads back to the bathroom. Quivering, he props opens one of the mirror-cabinet panes and, inside, at last, he finds his matryoshka doll, Svetlana Patrovna. He plants a kiss on her forehead and safely stores her in his pants pocket. He toys with the feeling of happiness.

But the boy's feigned happiness won't last long.

He walks over to his sister's room and barely opens the door. The girl's toys, which Alfonso had always found annoying, now fill him with tender longing.

Her scent lingers in the room despite her absence.

With a heavy heart, the boy looks at his father, who has fallen asleep on the girl's bed again. A purple bed that can't hold an adult. Alfonso closes the door. For a few seconds, he closes his eyes. Then, one by one, he closes up his Russian dolls. VM

Skin, display windows.

Claudio Valdés Kuri*

What's to Become of Theater?

I n uncertain times, speculation bubbles up in the human mind. We are especially attracted to apocalyptic designs portraying the end of the world as we know it. Collectively inclined to agonize over what's to come, the theater community can't help but join in the hubbub. In this text, I propose that we take advan-

* A playwright and theater director, Claudio Valdés Kuri founded Teatro de ciertos habitantes (Theater of Certain Inhabitants); he can be contacted at claudio@ciertoshabitantes.com.
Photos courtesy of the author.

tage of a theatrical tool that can help broaden our perspectives: memory. Let's travel in time so that we can gaze and think back upon that which we sometimes forget.

For as long as we sapiens have inhabited the Earth, some of us —even if just a few— have been engaged in drama. To cite Jorge Dubatti, "Theatricality is an anthropological attribution. It's the human capacity to organize the other's perspective, to reconstruct the other's perspective. . . . It's the basis for the social order." Theatricality has existed since the dawn of our interper-

sonal relationships. With the passing of time, we've given the establishment and accumulation of theatricality certain shapes, spaces, territories, materials, and sounds, culminating in a physical space that ultimately yielded its name to the profession itself: theater.

Ever since theater has existed as human craft-art-practice, it has survived multiple critical junctures. In the history of Western theater, after the great theater of Greek tragedy and the Roman circus, the Middle Ages followed —and its ideological canons greatly differed from Greek and Roman values. Among other changes, the great amphitheaters and colosseums of the past were abandoned as performance venues. In the face of ecclesiastic dogmas and the proliferation of deadly epidemics, so-

"Theatricality is an anthropological attribution. It's the human capacity to organize the other's perspective, to reconstruct the other's perspective. . . . It's the basis for the social order." J. Dubatti

ciety grew alienated and isolated. The church used theater as a means of spreading its ideology, and with that, theater relinquished its status as a space for philosophy. Nonetheless, there was some resistance to ecclesiastic censorship and social distancing on the stage, finding a voice among minstrels, troubadours, and buffoons: people-characters who pressed on with theater's

Of Monsters and Prodigies. The History of the Castrati.

Of Monsters and Prodigies. The History of the Castrati, rehearsal.

Photo: Ulises Velázquez

oral tradition despite the challenges, sharing dramatized stories from town to town.

Then, in the Elizabethan era, the proliferation of plagues meant that theaters were shut down for 78 of the 120 months spanning 1603 to 1613. Shakespeare lived through this time and had to reinvent his own theater paradigms to stay the course. In fact, it was under these circumstances that he wrote several of his most significant plays. Also during this period, the bubonic plague pushed one of the most important theater troupes out of London, which ultimately brought theater of the highest caliber to towns outside the capital that would otherwise have never had the chance to witness such performances.

After some time, the English Civil War broke out and the Puritans took over, banning plays on the grounds of moral indecency. From 1642 to 1660, for eighteen years, theaters remained closed. A number of large amphitheaters were demolished, but theater bounced back once the political situation stabilized — and, at this point, women took the stage (before then, female characters were played by men).

More recently, we may observe another time when theater faced severe limitations: the period of Latin American military dictatorships. Totalitarian regimes wielded unfathomable mechanisms for the censorship and persecution of artists who didn't

We artists of today are like the Latin American theater troupes of the dictatorships —still resisting the disappearance of theater, working up new forms and formats of representation.

stand by the ruling ideologies. The only theater allowed exclusively revolved around certain principles that aligned with the regime. Nonetheless, artists heeded their vital need for expression and found innovative methods that paved the way for unprecedented modes of production in small venues, with plays in people's homes and other alternative spaces.

Today, theater is facing yet another critical juncture: the impossibility of being present. But this isn't the first time, nor will it be the last. What do the critical junctures of the past share with the pandemic we're currently up against? What opportunities might arise?

First and foremost, we should highlight theater's resistance to disappearing —or humanity's resistance to theater disappearing— either through spaces for intimate creation, in which artists conjure up the projects of tomorrow and rethink the products and task of theater *per se*, or through proposals to promote and

develop new action mechanisms. We artists of today are like the minstrels of the Middle Ages or like the Latin American theater troupes of the dictatorships —and we are still resisting the disappearance of theater. And in doing so, we're working up new forms and formats of representation.

Second, let's consider the transformation of the means of production. In the face of limitations, the spirit of theater will always seek out new outlets for sharing and survival. The lockdown, together with digital-technological developments that are now at everyone's fingertips, have given way to a new genre, virtual theater: these *mise-en-scènes* unfold in real time and are viewed by audiences around the world through technological devices.

Analogously, just like the plague pushed English companies to places it had never trod before, today's virtual and recorded theater has reached audiences that would have never had access to such expressions otherwise. These productions travel through time, crossing borders, languages, and social classes.

Our moments of crisis have allowed us to push the limits of what we once conceived as theater, uncovering surprising possibilities. Nonetheless, despite the new opportunities that virtual theater offers, many of us yearn to meet again at the theater in person.

From one day to the next, our craft became a mortal weapon. Two of theater's main principles —making contact and coming together— were unveiled as the main adversaries of humanity. Given the risks, along with the comforts of staying at home, why go back to in-person theater?

Like little else, theater satisfies our need for fiction and association. To be in a community in space and time, with a shared purpose, as we mingle with people in a safe space, might sound simple, but it's far from banal. Every day, fewer and fewer spaces let us mingle with strangers and be in common-unity with them.

For many centuries, theater was our main source of fiction, especially for those without access to reading and writing. Fables, stories, and oral tradition found their homes on the stage. With the passage of time, other mediums started incorporating theater's practices and making them their own. At first, radio and radio dramas shook theater to its core —even before cinema,

Photo: Aline Lemus Bernal

Triple Concert, laboratory.

followed by television and, more recently, the Internet. But fiction has found a niche in each of these mediums, expanding and transforming them in turn. The emergence of these media once seemed to herald the end of theater, but it prevailed with its specific way of telling stories, offering experiences, and converging all our possible universes solely with the actor's imagination.

In my view, competing with other mediums isn't what should be worrying us, especially since each boasts its own features, advantages, and disadvantages. While it's true that most human beings might never make it to the theater for a number of reasons, that the diversification of cultural offerings has blunted some people's appetites for theater, and that theatergoers only constitute a small portion of society in Mexico and the world, thousands of people are still attracted to the performing arts, and —for them— all our efforts are worthwhile.

I believe today's seemingly adverse circumstances in which theater is unfolding actually pose an advantage. Given that theater isn't our primary means of communication, nor is it at the cusp of entertainment, we creators of the performing arts can speak about the things that matter to us, proposing novel and unique visions for and about the world. Theater could be conceived as a space of creative freedom for artists seeking to raise and share awareness.

The challenge lies beyond the pandemic itself. With time and perspective, the pandemic has shown that —as always— life goes on.

The challenge —and the greatest opportunity, too— is the brutal alienation that humanity is drowning in. We live shackled to quick, direct, and simple stimulations that ask nothing of us . . . but complete submission.

Photo: Centro de Investigación Teatral Rodolfo Usigli (CITRU)

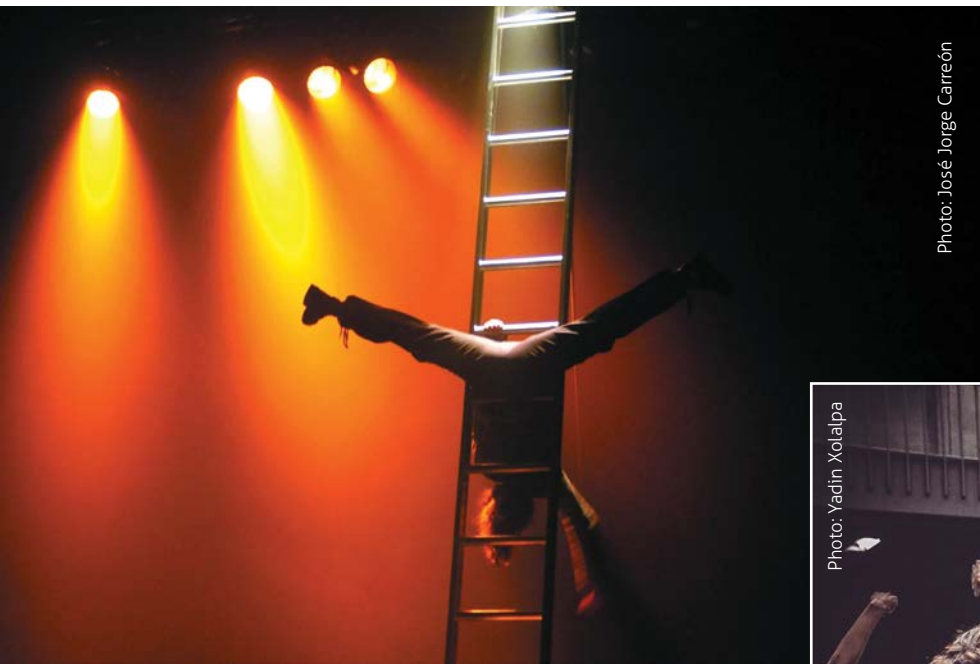*Where Will I Be Tonight?, Rehearsal* with audience.

Where Will I Be Tonight?

Game of Insects.

The current challenge, which I paradoxically see as the greatest opportunity, is the brutal alienation that humanity is currently drowning in. People live shackled to quick, direct, and simple stimulations that ask nothing of us . . . other than complete submission. In our everyday lives before the pandemic, a number of situations would force people to peel themselves away from their electronic devices: transportation, the office or classroom, etc. Now, our reliance on connectivity has justified the total hijacking of our space and time. The forces that used to demand that we be in the present have come to a halt.

Theater requires a commitment from those who have come together: mutual presence. If the spectator doesn't find the discourse sufficiently compelling, he can leave the room. If he decides to stay, his responsibility toward others will help him escape from escape, and he'll stay, observing and modifying what goes on between him and the stage.

What theater offers the viewer is the possibility of being with himself in solitude, but also in community. Contemplative solitude sets off connections between both hemispheres of the brain: the rational, which deciphers meanings and approves what's being received, and the intuitive, which sets the spectator's feelings in motion, generating reflections on the theatrical discourse between the two hemispheres. In-person theater constitutes a space of connection with the self, beyond the overstimulation of our daily lives.

I believe that, in and of itself, nothing is important to anybody. We have to make theater a need. And we can do so by understanding the conditions and current challenges of the other. I believe that theater must start being more than just a mirror —though mirrors can be useful, too, since they offer an array of creative alternatives beyond expanding on repetitive news stories or cinema's attempts at emulation. The artist could see herself as a visionary who can lift her gaze, analyze conflict, and afford creative solutions. My greatest wish is for theater to urgently turn up the planet's vibration frequencies, through discourse that can expand our consciousness in ways as infinite as our ways of making theater.

Ever since humanity has enjoyed unlimited access to information, the era of major social and ideological movements has begun to waste away. The current push toward social well-being is realized in small cells and human groups, with theater boasting the ideal conditions to make an impact as dazzling as it is unique.

We could ask ourselves why it is that we fear circumstances that lie beyond our control and come to understand that the stage of life constitutes the crystallization of our ability to conjure mental creations, that is, our collective and individual thought. Thus, we should revisit what frequencies our thoughts and affirmations are vibrating on. Let us revisit memory as a tool, so that we can keep in mind that the future of theater has yet to be written and will become whatever we want it to be. **VM**

MUSIC and the PANDEMIC

Alejandro Giacomán*

F or everyone whose livelihood depends on music, the lock-down due to the pandemic has proven disastrous and discouraging.

With concerts and live shows practically banned, most of us understand that the show can't go on, since large gatherings can lead to multiple exposures and to the closure of even more venues.

Live Concerts: Musical Creators', Technicians', And Organizers' Main Source of Income

With online music distribution, streaming, and the compact disc's imminent demise, artists' and composers' royalties are calculated as follows: when someone listens to a song for more than thirty seconds, artists and producers split US$0.005. For the average artist who's not a superstar (who can count on broad support and spend millions in publicity), royalties no longer turn a profit. Songs and albums have morphed into almost-free publicity, like business cards of sorts. The most significant income comes from live concerts.

* A film-score composer, former rocker, and music lover, Giacomán authored the novel *La próxima vez que vengas* (The Next Time You Come); he can be contacted at ag@noporsuerte.com.

What Do We Do in a Concert?

The following list will help us understand which concert activities can no longer take place due to the pandemic (marked with an N), and which can still occur, to an extent, in concerts shared through video or streaming (marked with a V).

Music-related activities:

—Seeing an artist, orchestra, or conductor close up, in the same venue. Giving them support. (N)

—Concentrating on the music with no distractions. Letting oneself go. (V)

—Analyzing the music and the performance, perhaps with the goal of creating something similar. (V)

—Enjoying loud music, screens, lights, and special effects. (V)

—Listening to live music with no streaming or recording mediating the experience. (N)

—Relaxing. (V)

—Getting excited. (V)

Social activities:

—Coming together to listen to music with friends, family, children, or a partner. (V)

—Accompanying younger children who want to attend the concert. (V)

Sam Mogadam / Unsplash.com

For everyone whose livelihood depends on music, the lockdown due to the pandemic has proven disastrous and discouraging.

Talles Alves / Unsplash.com

—Gifting the concert to someone who likes the artist. (V)

—Seeing a musician friend or relative, or a musician struggling for success. (V)

—Clapping and cheering. Giving the artist a full-venue standing ovation. (N)

—Singing, dancing, venting. (V)

—Consuming beverages, popcorn, other foods, and even drugs whose legality is beyond the scope of this article. (V)

—Proving that one was there by taking pictures or filming on a cellphone, perhaps for publication on social media. (It's hard to believe, but I've seen people watch entire concerts on a tiny phone screen.) (N)

—Attending a concert as a way of flaunting one's purchasing power or cultural finesse, perhaps showing off one's outfit and means of transportation as well. (N)

—Meeting gals (or guys). After buying tickets several times from an agency (a box office where one could reserve tickets), the agency's employees asked if I'd had success through the company. I realized that because I'd been going to concerts just to analyze the music, I'd been missing out on the fun. (N)

—Enjoying tickets purchased by a company, office, workplace, or media contest. (N)

—Buying merchandise or souvenirs from the artist.

I'm sure other, unsuspected reasons why one would attend a concert exist.

The pandemic has put a stop to social and musical activities that might unfold at a concert, and each person has her own reasons for wanting to attend or stay home.

Videostreaming, A Far-from-Ideal Solution

We can view a live or pre-recorded concert via streaming, but we all know it's not the same. Not everyone owns devices that can emit high-quality images and sound —and, watch out, or anything too loud could upset your neighbors. Socially, even though one can gather one's friends for a concert, if only to ask them

what they thought of the concert afterward, the fact is that only small groups can get together.

The artist must decide whether to prerecord a concert and put on a show just for streaming. This implies a cost, and to turn a profit, the show requires distribution via platforms that accept online payments or electronic proof of payment. Artists, technicians, and organizers would have to adjust their fields of specialization, learning to film, edit, produce videos, and program websites to keep the costs at bay. You either evolve or you're out.

So, let's consider streaming an available, but not ideal, solution.

And Speaking of Music at Home...

In Mexico City, we've seen a boom in another kind of concert that may have always existed, but that we've just noticed given the stay-at-home order. Home-delivered concerts. Ubiquitous street musicians not only bring us classical, traditional, popular melodies, but also serve as a constant reminder of their own misfortunes —displaced from their homes, they're in a perpetual struggle for survival, living day-to-day in precarious economic conditions. They go around the city, playing in small ensembles.

Individual members of a town band, most likely from Oaxaca, with a clarinet, trombone, and drum, do their best at my door-

step, playing something that's hard to put my finger on. I ultimately recognize a well-known, classic Mexican tune from the 1940s or 1950s, but they're playing it so strangely. Listening to fragments that seem isolated from the main melody, I intuit that the clarinet and trombone are following the parts they likely played for a full band —with a lot of instruments missing for the song to actually come through. A few benevolent neighbors venture outside and give them money. The musicians' face masks hang around their necks. Sometimes a sharp trumpeter shows up, too. He plays the melodies on his own, occasionally performing the tune from that Hollywood movie with the sinking ship. Acculturated indeed, at least he's giving us a break from the same old melody. It's already been applauded enough. I've heard that a marimba often graces the neighborhood, too. More lively and comprehensive, the musician even takes requests. Whether he's a street player or someone who once worked at a temporarily closed restaurant remains unknown. The other day, one of my neighbors hired a *norteña* band for his girlfriend's birthday. Some people will never forget how to party.

Experiments for Pandemic Concerts

Europe and the United States have toyed with experiments for pop music and nightclubs with DJs: the public must bring a negative, rapid COVID test when entering and exiting the concert. Some even have to wear electronic tags that track their movements with a computer registering all the nearby groups of people as a way of preventing infection and alerting people of potential transmission. Some concerts have also required face masks and social distancing. In the future, a vaccination card might also be required for such events. For Mexico, the cost of COVID tests would have to drop substantially for this option to be feasible.

The Mexican rock band Caifanes has put on concerts that people can attend from their cars and trucks, drive-in movie-theater style. One must wear a facemask and maintain social distance when exiting the vehicle —to buy beverages or go to

For music as we knew it before the pandemic to survive, we need —and I risk sounding sentimental— what we've all been wishing for: for everything to go back to the way it was.

the bathroom, I presume, but also to hear better and cheer the musicians on. If people must stay inside their vehicles, I would propose providing speakers for every car, or for concerts to somehow channel the sound through radios and cell phones. I imagine that the applause doesn't quite resonate outside the car, and that the concert might come off a bit cold, though people could honk their horns in praise.[1]

In Kiev's vertical concerts, musicians stand in front of a multistory hotel with balconies. The hotel rents the rooms out to small groups so that people in the audience can enjoy the concert from their own space, with hotel perks like food and drink, access to the minibar, and even a discount for those who'd like to stay the night.[2]

Meanwhile, the U.S. rock band Flaming Lips put on a show in which both the public and the band were enclosed in plastic bubbles. Each of the one hundred bubbles, with three people each, was equipped with a speaker, a fan, water, a towel, and signs to request to go to the bathroom, or to alert the staff of excess heat. I won't give my personal opinion on the comfort and sound, but I will say that concertgoers must have been dying to see their favorite band. I just hope the bubbles didn't fog up and that they stayed fully transparent.[3]

What about Classical Music?

Symphony orchestras have been uploading videos of past concerts on social media and have recorded new concerts, with no audience, too. Some have considered open-air concerts with social distancing. The audience would have to stay apart, in designated areas, which would also work with amplified, pop music. However, classical music isn't usually played outdoors. Traditionally, the sound shouldn't require amplifiers but should ring through a venue with proper acoustics. The cost of miking up forty-plus musicians can also add up. Classical concerts tend to showcase well-loved pieces before large audiences —consider, for instance, how the Nutcracker graces the stage every December. In Mexico, we don't have many large spaces for big, outdoor, classical-music concerts —spaces like the Hollywood Bowl in Los Angeles, or La Arena de Verona in Italy. There's also the issue of the weather.

I've heard orchestra directors mention the possibility of installing sophisticated ventilation and extraction equipment with multiple air columns, but not only would such equipment fail to guarantee that the virus doesn't spread, but the cost could also be prohibitive, implying both maintenance and noise, which would interfere with the music itself.

Dany Howe / Unsplash.com

On August 21, 2020, Mexico City's government switched its color-coded COVID warning sign to orange (with red being the most dangerous and green, the least). The new policy noted that, in theaters (excluding concert halls, of course), "live bands and orchestras playing wind instruments will not be allowed." A friend who plays one of these lethal instruments in the Fine Arts Orchestra found that, because of these guidelines, he's now considered an infectious-aerosol transmitter, a public enemy. Do we have nothing but masked-up orchestras with string instruments, piano, and percussions to look forward to? Are Beethoven and Mozart out? Leaving us Béla Bartók, perhaps? What about mariachi bands? The most Mexican music in the land, the whole enchilada, with guitar, guitarrón, and violin. Trumpeters should play the güiro and the conga instead. Otherwise, *Adiós muchachos*!

We've Found No Practical Solution

All of these possibilities face the main challenge of securing often non-existent infrastructure, with concert prices drastically soaring while audiences peter out. There's no way to compete against the 2,300-person concerts that fit at the UNAM's Nezahualcóyotl Hall, with no social distancing, or the 87,000-person concerts at the Azteca Stadium.

Considering the Mexican economy, and the fact that most costs would transfer directly to the audience, the public would mostly be made up of people with the highest purchasing power.

To me, a sometimes rational adult who doesn't always succumb to unbridled passions, streaming a concert at home is entirely preferable to any other option. But we'll have to see what someone who'd rather go to a concert to pick up a date, or any of the other activities I mentioned, would think.

Post-pandemic Music

Are we ready to see music as phenomenon that'll always reach us through the screen? I hope not.

Rumor has it that once the pandemic is over, we'll see a major bottleneck of artists vying to take the stage before an anxious audience. Furthermore, countless songs, albums, and works composed throughout the pandemic, will come out ready for their live debut. Whether that arrangement for the town band, that great hit, or that symphony awaiting publication will grace the outside world as we cheer on remains to be seen. May all the hours of practicing scales and arpeggios lead to perfect execution.

For music as we knew it before the pandemic to survive, we need —and I risk sounding sentimental— what we've all been wishing for: for everything to go back to the way it was. For vaccines, herd immunity, chewable pills, or anything, really, to conquer this pandemic, once and for all. And, while we're at it, for world peace, universal equality, and the end of hunger, too. VM

Notes

1 Rubén Ortega, "Caifanes en autoconcierto en CDMX," Indie Rocks! https://www.indierocks.mx/agenda/caifanes-ofrecera-una-serie-de-autoconciertos-en-cdmx/, April 20, 2020, accessed May 1, 2021.
2 Alyson Camus, "Are Vertical Concerts the Future of the Music Industry during the Pandemic?" ROCK NYC, http://rocknyc.live/are-vertical-concerts-the-future-of-the-music-industry-during-the-pandemic.html, July 25, 2020, accessed May 1, 2021.
3 VideoElephant, "Watch Now: Concert Experiments May Determine the Future of Live Music," *Journal Gazette & Times-Courier*, https://jg-tc.com/entertainment/watch-now-concert-experiments-may-determine-the-future-of-live-music/article_357ccf41-fe85-5af0-a40e-c1f16d83ace8.html, March 30, 2021, accessed May 1, 2021.

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Claudia Bataller Sala*

Reflections on Education In Mexico, 2021

W hat has happened in education after more than a year of pandemic in our country has undoubtedly sharpened pre-existing problems and put new challenges on the table.

In many spaces of analysis, we have seen and heard underlined the enormous existing social gaps —already alarming in the past— that have grown, with repercussions that are not even possible to clearly discern. In the short and medium terms, these will become more evident with drop-out rates in all educational levels, most notably at the pre-school and primary stages.

Without trying to minimize this basic framework, what we must deal with right now is to situate ourselves in the concrete and more specific: the teacher and his/her didactic efforts for making sure students learn. With

the prospect of the approaching return to schoolrooms, we must not ignore or vainly pretend that it is possible to ignore the different forms of work that have developed during the emergency. On the contrary, this is the time to reflect, analyze, and make decisions.

I want to present an encouraging vision based on certain circumstances that have changed or been created in the sphere of education.

Many teachers were forced to change their educational practices on all levels, particularly in the in-person or semi-in-person levels. Distance learning often already had an instructional design to guide the educational process.

The main changes involve planning, didactic methodology, the use of resources, evaluations, interaction among peers, teaching work, and links between school and community.

Teaching must be planned. We all know that bureaucratic and administrative pressure means that this basic part of the teaching process, particularly in face-to-face

* Ms. Bataller teaches at the UNAM University Open Distance-Learning System (SUAYED); she can be contacted at claudiabataller@filos.unam.mx.

mode, is seldom carried out in the way the program intends and is far from being done with the care required. This can lead to improvisation and getting off the track on a day-to-day basis. In the pandemic, teachers have been forced to send their students the activities to be carried out and the topics to be reviewed over a period of time; they have selected in advance the readings, maps, tables, and graphs and have designed their activities in accordance with the context, thinking about what the students can do from home. They have been forced to select the most important concepts, what simply cannot be left out in order to achieve the stated objectives, and have sought out the means to communicate and be able to involve their students in their education, using everything from a family member's cell phone to access social media, email, WhatsApp, to Internet platforms that may be very complete and even sophisticated.

In many cases, didactic planning has once again taken its authentic place for the teacher: flexible, creative, and adapted to the context.

Didactic methodology, that is, the form of carrying out the teaching/learning process, is certainly the aspect that has changed the most. In face-to-face teaching routine, traditional practices center on the teacher's action, even though all curricular documents state time and again that the core focus must be on the student and his/her learning. Given distancing, activities could no longer center on teachers and their words; they have diversified and been reformulated, often using technological and virtual resources that change the sequences, times, and participants. It is true that most of the time, they have been designed for individual work; but it is also true that teachers have looked for collaborative ways of working. In a recent educational experience, a teacher commented that every week, she would put up sheets of paper on the school door indicating the teamwork that her students should do, coordinating among themselves using cell phones with the help of family members to carry it out.

In the first phases of the virtual teaching experience, to feel confident, teachers tried to replicate what was most familiar to them, but many others began looking for resources on line. They wanted to carry out activities with technological support and found that there were some very simple, easily accessible resources, which led them to begin to change their practices and diversify their methodology.

The resources have been extremely varied. Using what has become known as "the three 'Rs'" has been fostered: re-using, recycling, and reducing. They have used materials found around the house as resources: any notebook, newspaper, and magazine; tin cans; yarn; fabric remnants, etc. They couldn't ask students to go to out to stationary stores or malls, which were mostly closed or had restricted working hours. Once again, the enormous storehouse of the Internet was used, as well as platforms and sites offering free access to material like books, talks, videos, films, artistic materials, teachers' courses, educational discussions, and book fairs.

Evaluations have once again been put on the agenda as an important point. This topic is always tough to deal with because of its complexity. It has had to expand to go beyond mere grading and certification, to look again at the day-to-day, what can be done, the evidence that can be taken into account that is often the product of learning not only by the student but also incorporating family cooperation. Therefore, the validity of a specific exam-type exercise has been brought into question; the suggestions have been to apply continual evaluation through process observation, self-evaluation, and co-evaluation.[1]

Often unconsciously or indirectly, metacognition is being promoted as an essential part of the distance evaluation process.[2] It fosters the students themselves being the ones to reflexively assess and review their own work, their cognitive strengths and weaknesses, the abilities they're developing, and the skills that are being neglected. It is by no means easy to do this kind of accompaniment; however, given the multiple obstacles involved in virtual learning, teachers have had to gradually formulate questions about how the children perceive their own learning, what they have understood, and what remains to be reviewed: in short, a metacognitive process.

For almost a decade, pedagogues have attempted —without much success— to get teachers to not work in isolation. The idea has been for them to organize with their peers so that, through collegiate exchange, they could achieve more enriched, accompanied work. In our country at least, the meetings held before COVID-19 on the primary level, were mostly dedicated to reviewing administrative issues and deadlines, not academic or methodological exchange that can contribute so much to planning; however, some steps were beginning to be made. That is why we can think that this is perhaps one of the

> Students want to go back to school,
> to the university, to be able to share, to
> simply be there and be part of the
> other with the others.

spheres most affected by the pandemic: the spaces for academic exchange were lost, which are so necessary for consolidating different interdisciplinary proposals, different visions of a same topic or project, or simply for having the opportunity to be listened to by another colleague facing similar problems with their classes and the students' learning. Remote work forced teachers to return to isolated, individual work.

Not only have teachers been affected by this lack of socialization, but also the students have shown on all levels the need for contact, the exchange of seeing and feeling each other. They have missed their playgrounds, the physical schoolroom filled with stories, comments, laughter, and sometimes also tears. They want to be able to talk about things that could at first seem superficial, but are the essence of learning with others about life, and without any doubt are significant and beloved. They want to go back to school, to the university, to be able to share, to simply be there and be part of the other with the others.

Different mental health experts have pointed out the social and emotional impact that this episode of isolation, fear, insecurity, mourning, and pain will have. School cannot avoid being part of that, and educators will have to take up this point as an essential part of their work.

Everything seems to point to the fact that students will soon have access to educational facilities. What is missing now is to determine how that can happen without running health and contagion risks that lead us back to an emergency. To do that, we already have protocols designed with the basic measures: desks at the appropriate distance, cleaning materials, obligatory use of facemasks, and countless other measures that are being detailed more every day. However, each institution will have to define in pedagogical —and above all didactic— terms how they return so they can ensure that students learn. This is where we must be very careful. After the experience we have gone through, we must give ourselves time to think, to evaluate (in the best sense of the term), to

assess what has been achieved and what should be reformulated and taken up out of all the synchronized and out-of-sync practices that we have experimented with.

It is neither possible nor desirable to try to go back to teaching as though the clock had stopped for more than a year, or to try to just add in all the experiences without prior analysis of the effect they have had, or use exactly the same process of virtual teaching in a classroom situation.

If we go back to the principle that it is the student who should be at the center of education, then we will have to begin by reviewing all those who have been left on the sidelines, those who have become more vulnerable because of family circumstances and the changes around them. And we will have to put forward scenarios that can make inclusive integration possible to achieve the socialization we so ardently seek and look for strategies for participation and reincorporation.

Surely, with a return to the classroom, diagnostics will be established in accordance with the study plans to be able to identify existing formal cognitive shortfalls. However, we must take into account that those curricula were not designed or adjusted for remote learning. We should also question them; we should re-signify them and open them up so they can include everything that has been learned, the skills built that have made it possible to achieve a fundamental premise of education, problem-solving ability, which brings with it another basic principle: self-organization.

The challenge is unprecedented. We will have both students in the classroom and others who continue to do distance learning because they or a family member are part of an at-risk population. The invitation is to combine and alternate systems of in-person classroom activities and online learning. Through didactic planning done with complete awareness and in accordance with individual and group needs, this will have to integrate cognitive and emotional aspects, as well as procedures to reestablish and strengthen social, emotional, and learning links. **M**

▼
Notes

1 Co-evaluation is understood as the feedback the students provide for each other.
2 John Flavell coined the term "metacognition," which refers to becoming aware of one's own knowledge process.

At School but Alone
with the Screen

The COVID-19 pandemic lockdown has not been easy for anyone, but perhaps one of the hardest hit sectors has been students. From pre-school to university, the pandemic has prevented them from continuing their day-to-day activities inside and outside the classroom. Here is the testimony of six students.
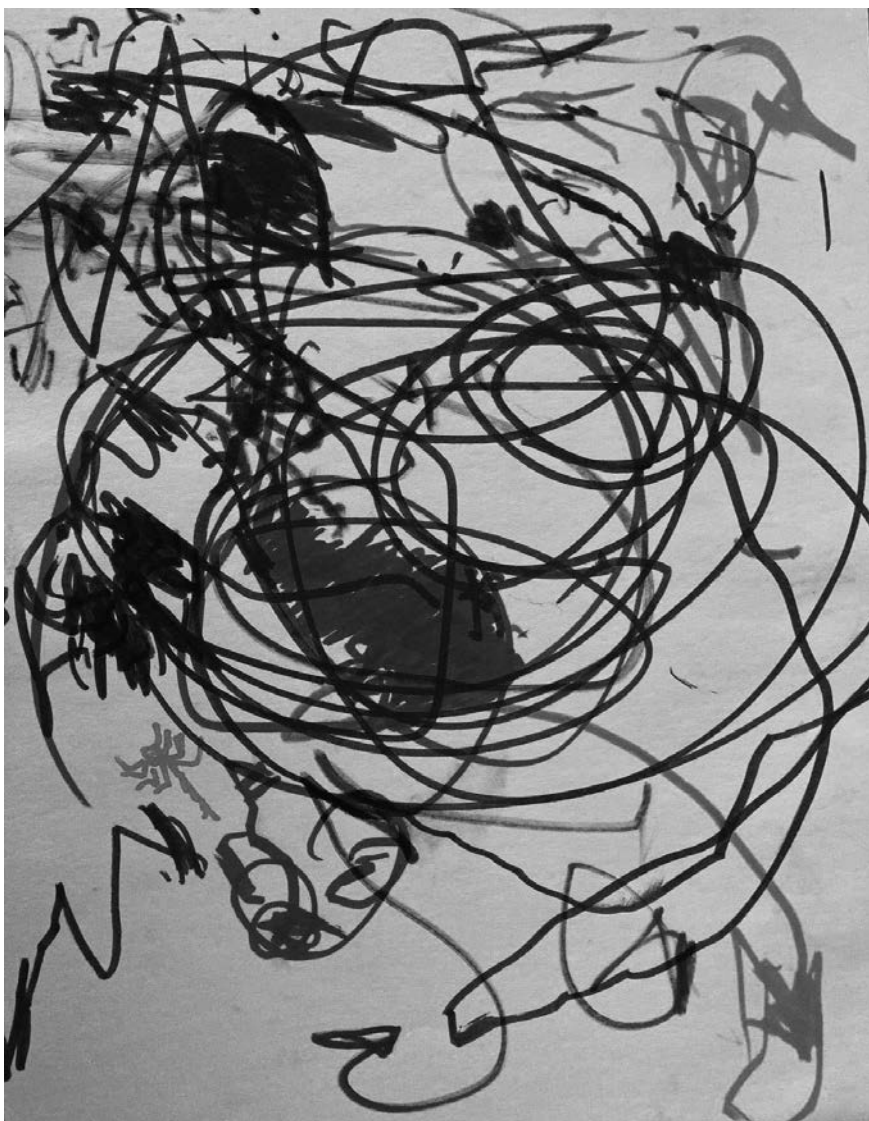

Laia (three years old)

When the pandemic started, Laia had been going to a daycare center for a year and she liked it very much. When she was sick and couldn't go, she got angry. Now, after a year and a half of the pandemic, she doesn't remember much about the daycare center, but, at first, she became very anxious and needed to leave the house. Several times she picked up her backpack, went to the door, and repeated, "Go out, go out, go out," so we would take her out.

When online classes started, at first, she was very excited to see her friends on the screen, but after a few months, she no longer liked the classes; they bored her and she needed interaction. Also, she stopped seeing a lot of her friends because many didn't enroll the following year. Fortunately, she made a good friend during the pandemic and she still has him. We visit the park when the pandemic stoplight is green. When she misses him, she asks to have a videocall with Pablo.

Jennifer (nine years old)

It was very hard for me to be at home during the pandemic; I missed my friends and my teacher a lot, because I lost touch with them. I think I haven't learned much in the online classes, compared to before the pandemic. To get promoted to the next grade, I have to turn in lots of homework and sometimes I don't have an Internet connection. That's when it's hard to turn my homework in on time. But now I'm excited and happy to be going back to school.
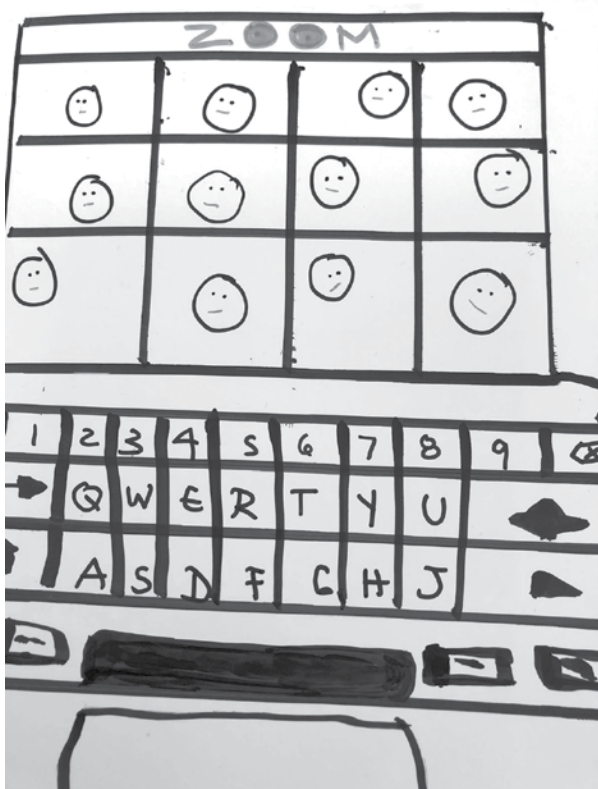
Aitana (twelve years old)

I spent half the school year in my other school, and the way they arranged online education was very different from how they did it in the school I changed to, because there they had been doing it longer and they had more experience. It didn't seem difficult to go to a new school because they welcomed me with open arms. But the quality of my work dropped a bit because I couldn't concentrate very well. Getting up every day and going on line wasn't hard for me. On the contrary, it was more relaxed than having to get up earlier to get to school on time.

Also, even though I was the new kid, I was able to make friends because the teachers encouraged it. I made a friend called Begoña, and then she introduced me to her friends, even though, sure, I really missed having direct contact with them. It's just not the same on a screen or on the phone.

Camilo (eleven years old)

Well, what I was doing was to do some things I used to do, like, for example, martial arts or gardening, germinating plants, real exotic stuff. Swordplay also interests me a lot and so, that's how I passed the time. Everything was really horrible. I heard all about it on a Chinese news program —I also learned Mandarin— and I'd tell my parents. But they said it was all fake news; I knew it was going to get to Mexico, but my parents didn't pay any attention to me. Finally, the virus did come here and it was real; it was devastating. That was my experience.

Pablo (eleven years old)

My experience in the pandemic hasn't been very good because the first year we were shut up here and not much happened. Online classes were a little confusing, a little difficult, and I had to learn to use everything really fast, like Gmail, Classroom, and Zoom. The second year, my grandpa died of COVID and, well, we just kept on doing the same thing. So, let's just say my experience during the pandemic hasn't been very good.

David (21 years old)

I'm a first-year, undergrad med student at the UNAM. Even I don't know how the COVID-19 pandemic changed me so much. I'm a completely different person.

Before the pandemic, I was studying at the School of Dentistry at this same university and my life was very active: school, my family, friends, and everything that goes with all that. University City was my favorite place, where I experienced sunsets, dawns, rain, laughter, tears, and an endless number of stories. The pandemic changed the life I was leading overnight, and with it, it took away lots of things, among them my school life and, of course, my mental health, just like what happened to many other people.

The pandemic helped me understand that I didn't want to continue studying dentistry. And now, here was another challenge: taking the tests to enter the School of Medicine. So, with coursework, study guides, videos, and thousands of pieces of paper, I prepared for that test. I failed it twice by just a few questions. That made my mental health even worse, since I felt defeated. And not having contact with the outside world, without seeing my friends, sometimes not even going out to get some sun, and the news announcing every day the mounting deaths and contagion just made me feel worse.

I thought of giving up, but I didn't. So, I studied hard again, even though I was afraid of failing, and the weeks went by until I got my test results back on July 16 [of last year]: I had been admitted to the School of Medicine with one of the highest grades: 118 out of 120.

I've just started the school year in my new school. My training as a doctor is beginning amidst one of the world's most dire health situations, and I think that's something I'll always remember. Obviously, not everything began as I had expected, since we're still taking classes on line. The workload is huge; there are some really tiring days when it's overwhelming to spend so much time in front of the computer. There's no socialization, and of course, the nostalgia for some day being able to return to the university is still there, since it's not the same to look at a computer monitor as it is to look out a window and see the whole campus outside.

I wouldn't say the pandemic has been the worst thing that's ever happened in my life, because I've changed, and, above all, learned to value everything I have. **VM**
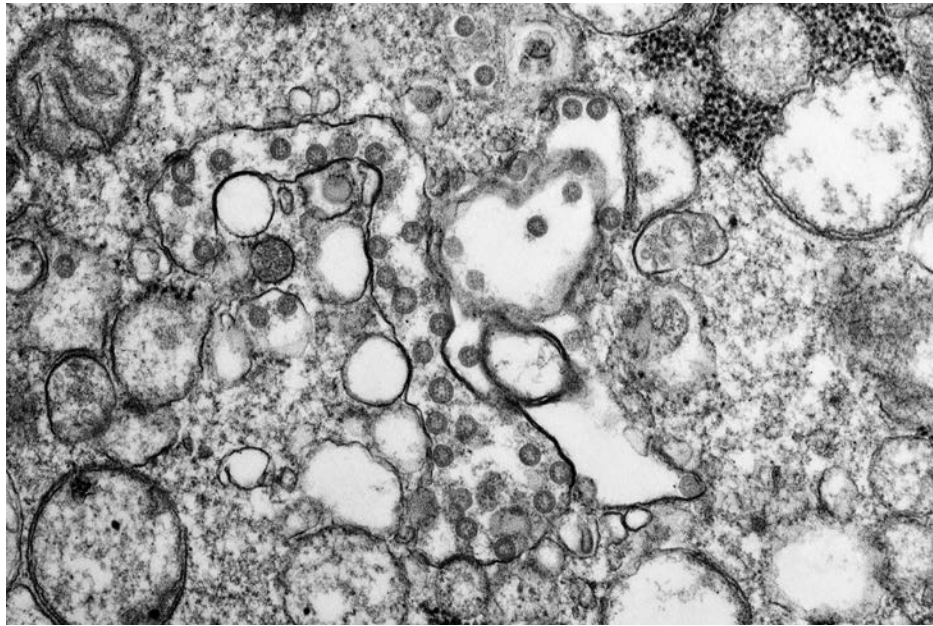
Teresa Jiménez*

Keeping This Virus in Mind

Interview with Dr. Guillermo Ruiz Palacios[1]

Teresa Jiménez (TJ): Did the pandemic catch us by surprise?

Guillermo Ruíz Palacios (GRP): Yes, it did, because what happened was like when the boy cried wolf. When the influenza pandemic hit, we were partially prepared, and even though it was important, it didn't have the effects that the 1918 pandemic had, for example. When we saw that the consequences weren't as devastating as they could have been, both people like myself who work with this for a living, and the public health authorities neglected preparations, and programs that began at the start of this century, since 2002, were discontinued. I'd say we were prepared and we weren't, because we didn't think that we'd have a pandemic of the characteristics and magnitude of the one we're going through now.

TJ: Was this neglect, this pause in the fight against this kind of virus national or worldwide?

GRP: I think it was worldwide, but some countries never let their guard down, and those are the ones who have fared better. Yes, there was certain preparation after the N1H1 influenza crisis, which had important effects, but not the economic impact and, above all, the impact on health that the current COVID-19 pandemic is having.

TJ: And what about the so-called Spanish flu epidemic? What differences are there today, a century later? Are there commonalities?

GRP: Well, they have certain things in common. The 1918 influenza virus, the Spanish flu, was very similar to the one that emerged in 2009. This meant that the older population, people sixty-five and over, didn't have such a hard time of it because they had previous immunological history, and the hardest hit part of the population in 2009 was young adults, who had no immunological memory against it. For this group in particular, the effects were very serious indeed. That is, there were important differences. In 1918, the planet was in the throes of World War I and the population was highly concentrated, with

* Teresa is the Editor-in-chief of *Voices of Mexico*; she can be contacted at tejian@unam.mx.

overcrowding causing widespread transmission with no prior immunity. So, the consequences were devastating. In the 2009 pandemic, older people had prior immunity and the conditions weren't the same: there was no war and the transmission wasn't as quick. That is, environmental conditions were different, and that may also have played a part in its not having the impact it did on public health in 1918.

TJ: How do humans dialogue with viruses?

GRP: Some viruses are native to human beings: there are viromes and microbiomes, many viruses living in our bodies naturally. But other viruses are not natural to humans, like the coronaviruses. The latter are natural to rodents, and some particular groups are very specific to bats, and we are only occasional transitory hosts for them. Since these viruses evolve very quickly and constantly go through important mutations, they can adapt to humans in a certain way, infecting them easily and producing a different response than the one they cause in their natural hosts. And that's what makes a disease develop, making the transmission different and giving it very particular characteristics.

For example, this coronavirus, SARS-COV-2, has very high transmission capabilities, and that's why it spread and mutated so quickly, compared to the other SARS-COV-2 variants. A few small mutations were extremely important in making human beings one of the main receivers of the virus and making its transmission so implacable. Another example of this is happening now with the virus's mutations, the variants that have emerged in South Africa, in the United Kingdom, and in Brazil. These strains have changed and have caused these new waves of transmission and infection.[2]

TJ: Why do these mutations take place in such particular places? Brazil, South Africa, England: is there any specific reason?

GRP: We don't really know; at least I don't know why they may have happened in those particular places. I think it has a lot to do with the local controls in place, the capacity for propagation in the regions themselves, the rapid transmission, and the acquisition of immunity. Because these viruses mutate in the presence of people who are already immunized or partially immunized, above all in that group. That is what favors mutations; that we do know. But we still don't know what happened in these three groups in particular. Perhaps those populations already had a prior immunity shared with these viruses.

> This epidemic would not have happened if all the conditions of how we've been living hadn't come together. Globalization is real, and we're going to have to know how to handle it.

TJ: Is there any evidence that we're generating a microbiome resistance?

GRP: Yes, definitely. This happens a lot with bacteria and the indiscriminate use of antibiotics; and it also happens with some viruses. HIV is the best example. It has a great capacity for mutation, and we often have to use new medications because people develop resistances. These resistances develop due to inappropriate use of antivirals, whether people stop taking them or because of prolonged usage. With continuous use, the virus develops mutations to respond to those specific antivirals. That hasn't happened so far with the coronavirus because very few antivirals are being used continually or for a long period in the general population. But with influenza, we have observed important resistances to some of the antivirals that were being used before.

TJ: You developed the protocol for the Cansino vaccine here in Mexico, and you've also participated in developing many other vaccines. Is there any difference between this one and the others?

GRP: Well, there are different vaccines, but they all work on the same principle. With a few exceptions, all the vaccines use a very specific protein of the virus; it's a protein whose job is to join the cellular receptors of the respiratory and intestinal epithelium. It's the S protein, called the "spike," and that's the common denominator. There's only a group of vaccines that uses the same system that's used for the flu vaccines, that uses a complete inactive virus. But the rest are recombinant vaccines that use the S protein, and there are different ways of producing that. But, at the end of the day, what we create are antibodies against that protein.

TJ: Can we know if the vaccine will generate herd immunity? Would that be the objective?

GRP: Well, that's what we expect will happen, because it's what happens with most vaccines and existing vaccination programs. We get to a point at which an important proportion of the population is immune and that slows the circulation of the viruses. And that means that, in a

certain way, the virus disappears from those populations. The best example is the smallpox virus, or what is happening now with polio. In some countries, above all in practically all of the Americas, infection from the polio virus has been controlled precisely due to herd immunity.

TJ: Moving on to other topics: in the past, many social problems were clear before, but now with the pandemic, they've become even more visible. These include the great social inequality among countries and among citizens of a single country; the terrible relationship we have with the environment; the ecological imbalances that we ourselves have also created and that have had an influence on the spread of this virus; and also, of course, the enormous deficiencies in the world's and every country's health systems. What lessons will the pandemic leave us?

GRP: In particular, this pandemic has changed the way we develop as a society, and it will have a very, very important impact. Hopefully, it'll be an impact that we can learn how to live differently from. This epidemic would not have happened if all the conditions of how we've been living hadn't come together. Globalization is real, and we're going to have to know how to handle it because, it was precisely the global dimension that made it possible for transmission to happen all over the world in such a short time. And specifically, this infection arose out of very local characteristics, out of the behavior of a specific society. I'm referring to the Chinese population, with its specific customs, with such a high demographic density, which encouraged a virus that was limited to a relatively isolated animal population to include the human race.

The so-called "wild" viruses live in areas with no contact with humans or only sporadic contact. The circle of life of these viruses is through small mammals. The virus transmits from a group of animals living in the wild, making certain populations a tasty dish for them. These animals, in fact, were from other sites in Asia and were concentrated in such very specific, very particular culinary markets in China. The virus passed on to humans and from there, it became a global problem. Right now, China is the center of the world; everything goes and comes from there; it's the world's most important trade center.

TJ: It's also a change in balance, isn't it? In ecological balance, the balance of power, balance in trade…

GRP: The other example is the 2009 influenza: all the flu outbreaks and pandemics have originated in Southern Asia for as long as we can remember. But 2009 was the first time, as far as we know, that a virus originated in the Americas. It was born exactly in the pork trade between Mexico and the United States, and its intermediary hosts were pigs. For a new human virus to be formed, it almost always has to go through this circuit. Normally, fowl are the natural reservoir; the intermediaries are pigs; and we humans are the end point. That's how new influenza viruses are generated. Once again, we're facing a unique situation, the consequence of the kind of life we have based on globalized trade.

TJ: How do you think we could act in a holistic way with nature, science, and society?

GRP: I think this has been a good lesson, particularly for our country, where science has never been given enough importance and impetus; it's never been considered an essential part of designing the country's general policies, particularly health policies, but also those for other sectors. In Mexico, and in general in Latin America, science is undervalued and very little known. People think it's something isolated, and they don't integrate it into their own activities for developing the country. And that's what I think has to change.

TJ: Do you think the world will be the same after this pandemic? What expectations can we have?

GRP: No, I definitely think not. Although once this virus is under control, the same thing may happen to us again, and we may forget, but I hope not. I think that that has to be one of the main reasons to keep in mind from now on, that our behavior in the last fifty years is leading us to our own destruction. And the fact that the virus can be controlled must be a lesson for thinking about how we're going to continue and how we're going to live for the next hundred years. **VM**

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Notes

1 Dr. Ruiz Palacios graduated in medicine from the UNAM and is currently a researcher emeritus in medical sciences, as well as the director of the Salvador Zubirán National Institute of Medical Sciences and Nutrition Virology and Molecular Biology Laboratory. He has pursued an important career in gastrointestinal and respiratory infection research, as well as into dengue and zika. He pioneered the study of HIV/AIDS in Mexico and currently of SARS-COV-2, heading up the protocol for the application of the Cansino vaccine.
2 At the time of this interview, the Delta variant had not come on the scene yet. [Editor's Note.]

Amado Nieto Caraveo*

The Uncertain Certainty Of a Pandemic

How can we measure uncertainty? How can we know what we don't know? Strictly speaking, it's impossible, and we can only approximate this kind of knowledge. In this article, I will cover some approximations in the field of neurobiology and cognitive theory to explain how we deal with uncertainty and how that can help us understand our individual and social behavior in the face of unexpected, minimally certain events such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

At some point between 50,000 and 100,000 years ago —and we don't know if it was gradual or sudden— human beings developed a kind of consciousness that allowed them to acquire a concept of self-identity (their selfhood) and the concept of time. Human beings have a narrative consciousness that requires semantic, and finally linguistic, capability. That is how uncertainty emerged as the perception of the partial or complete ignorance of one of the two extremes of identity —and therefore, of existence—, whether it be the past or the future. This state of uncertainty had to be reduced to a minimum, which seems to be explained by the evolutionary need to save valuable energy resources used to reverse the disorder produced by adapting to the environment. The best representation of the latter are states of "surprise," that is, the appearance of unexpected events. It is always better for the brain to avoid surprises, which are very costly.

By the nineteenth century, German physician and physicist Hermann von Helmholtz proposed that some of the principles that were valid for thermodynamic systems might also be applicable to biological systems. From then on, it became evident that the organization of certain tissues like the human brain did not fit in with the second law of thermodynamics, according to which every energy system tends to disorder (entropy). So, to be able to maintain stable organization, a system must minimize its "free energy," which, in the case of the brain, is none other than its state of uncertainty. However, for most of the twentieth century, the empirical proof of these hypotheses was limited to registering electrical impulses in the brain, given the impossibility of accessing neuron functioning in real time.

The prevailing model for brain functioning conceives it as an apparatus that receives a series of perceptual stimuli (visual, auditory, etc.), with which it constructs a mental image of reality, based on which it issues a response (behavior). This model, which moves from the sensory to the motor system, underlies many of the hypotheses proposed to explain psychological phenomena and predominates in the popular idea of mental functioning.

Nevertheless, this approach has been questioned by the free-energy principle, given that it requires too much additional energy to achieve equilibrium. In light of the new evidence that has emerged in recent decades derived from the use of new technologies for accessing brain functioning in real time, such as functional magnetic resonance, a new theory about the way the brain minimizes uncertainty has been proposed. This theory posits that the brain is the generator of *a priori* hypotheses about reality. Our

* Dr. Nieto is a psychiatrist and professor of clinical epidemiology at the San Luis Potosí Autonomous University School of Medicine; he can be contacted at amado.nieto@uaslp.mx.

mind is predictive. Our predictions are based on the experiences of the past deposited in the episodic memory, which makes the narrative identity of one's self coherent, and in the perceptual and motor memory. This creates a prior probability of an event that could happen in reality, which may be accurate —the event actually happens— or not —the prediction was erroneous. In this model —also called allostatic—, the function of the brain is to reduce predictive errors to a maximum, whether by changing predictions or the predicted sensorial inputs through action. This means that, in the quest for minimizing uncertainty (erroneous predictions), beliefs may be adjusted in accordance with experience (bottom-up processes), but also, to the contrary, experience may adapt to beliefs (top-down processes).

It is interesting to observe that the same logic used in the preceding paragraphs applies to the old scientific debate in the field of statistical inference among the so-called frequentists and the Bayesians. The former consider that one decides that statistical hypotheses are true or false according to the estimate of a parameter, which occurs with greater frequency if we suppose that an event can be repeated "n" times. In this scenario, you calculate an objective probability independent of the observer. For the Bayesians, the only thing that can be estimated is the extent to which the certainty of a prior belief about a group of data about reality can change; that is, what is calculated is a subjective probability. In Bayesian methods, the "weight" of reality for changing our beliefs will be relative to the prior probability. Thus, it does not matter that evidence shows a high probability, since if my prior belief is not very probable, the subjective probability will *a posteriori* continue to be low.

This is why it is said that we have a "Bayesian" brain. Many brain functions can be explained in light of these principles. So, learning can be formulated as a mechanism for optimizing predictive mistakes through the codification of causal regularities. This means that motricity is a form of adjusting perceptions that, in turn, modify predictions. In short, the brain constantly develops predictions about the world, and, to do so, uses the rules of Bayesian statistics. It is important to point out that, because of what I will explain further down, the prediction itself becomes a variable to be introduced into the model and that an *a posteriori* probability automatically turns into an *a priori* probability for other events.

Once again, the starting point is the *a priori* probabilities, a kind of subjective perception about the probability that something will happen according to prior experience. In our day-to-day experience, we have the perception that things exist that have a certain probability of happening. Let's use the climate as an example. During the rainy season, perhaps on a day that it traditionally, or "always" rains —for example, in Mexico, people say that it always rains on June 24, Saint John's Day—, we leave our house in the morning with a high expectation of rain and so carry an umbrella, regardless of the fact that the weather forecast says that the probability of rain is low and that no clouds are visible anywhere. This means that, even though the objective evidence predicts that it will not rain, the *a priori* probability is so high that our *a posteriori* probability does not change, even if the data are solid. The opposite happens in early March when "it never rains" and, therefore, we leave the house without an umbrella despite seeing a cloudy sky. In his book *The Black Swan* (2007), Nassim Taleb proposes that the past should not be used to predict the future, given the role that chance plays and which is often underestimated both by science and everyday intuition. He explores the occurrence of highly improbable events, deemed so because they have occurred only seldom in the past, but that can have devastating consequences. One example of this would be the COVID-19 pandemic.

The appearance of a pandemic related to a respiratory virus with its origins in another animal species had been considered something that "could happen sooner or later," after the experiences with the SARS, H1N1, and MERS epidemics (2002, 2009, and 2012, respectively). The coronaviruses were ideal candidates given the distribution and behavior of bats, their most common hosts. The current risks of propagation of such a virus were also known, taking into account human beings' intense, rapid mobility around the planet spurred by globalization. Despite all this knowledge, however, which was public, when SARS-COV-2 appeared, we were all taken unawares: governments, institutions, companies, and families.

For Nassim Taleb, history is full of "black swans": improbable events but that, when they do occur, have a high impact. In his view, the best strategy is not to count on an *a priori* probability and to be prepared for anything, which he calls the construction of an anti-fragile system, that can resist catastrophic events. This is appli-

cable, among other areas, for financial, political, and biological systems.

For his part, at the beginning of the pandemic, Karl Friston, of London's University College, one of the neuroscientists who has developed the principle of free-energy for explaining mental states, proposed applying similar statistical models to those, so to speak, that the brain uses to make predictions, in order to explain the pandemic's behavior. Most of the projections that had been constructed by summer 2020 had failed to predict the peak and end of the pandemic. Along the same lines of what Taleb proposes, for Friston, this is because even tiny variations in the parameters with which traditional models are constructed led to very different results. The compartmental models that had been used in the past to explain the evolution of epidemics did not work in the same way with COVID-19. In Taleb's terms, what we were dealing with was a model that does not work in fragile systems, with "fat tailed" distributions, where the catastrophic event is situated on the extreme.

According to Friston, the other reason that predictive models were insufficient can be explained using the Bayesian principle that states that once the *a posteriori* probability of an event has been calculated, it turns into the *a priori* probability for the following one. As an example, let's say that an optimistic model is constructed that predicts the epidemic will be controlled in the next six months. That same prediction will affect how the event evolves. Paradoxically, optimistic models lead politicians to relax protective measures, which ends up worsening the initial scenario based on which the predictive model was created.

For these authors, the exposure, susceptibility, contagiousness, and deadliness, not to mention the variants of the virus itself, are too heterogeneous to be able to establish really predictive models, given the impossibility of having a reliable *a priori* probability. As a result of this reasoning, they propose always acting according to the "precautionary principle," fundamental for constructing anti-fragile systems.

In terms of day-to-day intuition, this means abandoning the construction of certain expectations that have been fed by an era based on the notion of nations' progress, especially with regard to their economies. In particular, the global economic system is very sensitive to catastrophic events, since it does not take into account that sooner or later, some events of this kind, considered

> Uncertainty emerged as our perception of the partial or complete ignorance of one of the two extremes of identity —and therefore, of existence—, whether it be the past or the future.

improbable, will, in fact, occur. The same can be said for people in their individual life experiences. We construct narrative projections of our lives without taking into account the appearance of unpredictable events, such as the death of loved ones, illnesses, and accidents, which are due more than we believe to chance. It is very difficult for us to accept that most of life's events are outside our control, and for that reason, we should always act according to the precautionary principle. To do that, the proliferation of belief systems that artificially increase *a priori* probabilities of success and that include the fact that simply having them influences the result does not help.

Nothing is new under the sun. For thousands of years we have constructed fantasies of control as an adaptive mechanism in a predictive system of energy and reproductive needs. And they will continue to be so until this becomes untenable. At some point it is probable that climate-change-related catastrophic events will occur that we are unprepared for, despite the information predicting them, which is public and unavoidable. The question is, what will the cost be in terms of human suffering? ◤M

Further Reading

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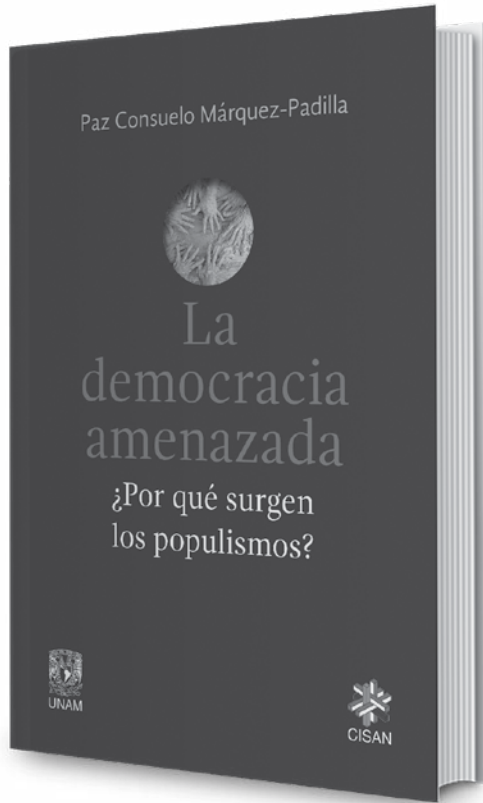Friston, Karl J.
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La democracia amenazada.
¿Por qué surgen los populismos?
(Democracy Threatened. Why Do Populisms Exist?)
Paz Consuelo Márquez-Padilla
UNAM, Center for Research on North America
Mexico City, 2020, 270 pp.

Undoubtedly, reflecting on democracy and populism has become fundamental for political philosophy and science in these first years of the third millennium. Neither democracy nor populism are one-dimensional concepts; both depend on multiple theoretical, political, ideological, cultural, and even religious issues. One of this book's main virtues is that it recognizes this diversity of approaches and practices from the start and explores the development of democracies —democracies, plural— and the emergence of populisms. In fact, the author maintains that it is also not a matter of necessarily counterposed concepts or realities, but of multiple forms with different intensities; hybrid political systems exist that mix char-

acteristics of both categories, naturally, in different proportions and with very different consequences.

For all of these reasons, the author presents a broad, comprehensive picture of the main and most influential theories about democracies that the Western world's foremost political theoreticians have produced, with emphasis on U.S. political thinking. Starting with the classics, Locke and Rousseau, she reviews and analyzes those conceptions of democracy centered, for example, on the strength of democratic institutions, on the constitutional design of republics, and on respect for the rule of law. At the same time, she looks at the positions that emphasize social justice and equal economic opportunities, the construction and consolidation of a welfare state, or positions that focus on fostering responsible, free, and informed participation of the citizenry and the strengthening of civil society, or that concentrate on the importance of the inclusion of minorities, the respect for those who are different in all the meanings of the word, and the culture of non-discrimination. According to the author, all these conceptions must share basic convictions, which, taken together, result in a minimum definition of democracy that shares certain common characteristics, such as the unavoidable commitment to representative democracy; checks and balances; the guarantee of individual freedoms and human rights, such as the freedom of information and opinion, the right to free enterprise, and religious freedom; together with the fundamental rights to life, education, health, and the pursuit of happiness, among many others. These are the fundamental characteristics that no democracy can do without. It also cannot do without a minimum degree of coherence and electoral transparency. It is inconceivable without unrestricted respect for the vote of the citizenry, as well as the acceptance of the results, which implies the ever-present possibility of alternating in office. Along these lines, the book underlines how important it is for a democracy to develop political culture and civic education. The more society is involved in collective matters and government policies, the greater the possibility that the decisions involving the common good will be the product of dialogue and consensus and not of manipulation and imposition.

Perhaps for all these reasons, the author maintains that the most fully developed theoretical position about the democratic system is the deliberative democracy current, which she ascribes to. This current has been led above all by English-speaking political philosophers like David Held, Jon Elster, Joshua Cohen, Amy Gutmann, and Seyla Benhabib, all followers one way or another of Jürgen Habermas's theory of communicative action. For this group of thinkers, the best possibility democracy has for consolidating is deliberation, which is nothing less than the practice of the highest form of rational dialogue. This is the case, according to the author, because it builds consensuses and, above all, because it generates agreements based on argumentation and persuasion, and, therefore, on the recognition that there is always truth in the position of the "others," which means that negotiating also implies conceding.

In all these senses, Paz Consuelo Márquez-Padilla's book is also characterized by its outstanding conceptual wealth, its intention to delve deeply into something that many have tried to explain, but few have been able to with sufficient theoretical rigor: What happens in many of today's democracies in which contemporary populist movements have emerged and triumphed, several of which have done so via elections? Why do societies lean toward leaders and movements that promise a utopia, but end by undermining the pillars of the freedoms and institutions of liberal democracy? What conceptions of democracy and justice underlie regimes classified as populist, which have managed to be so attractive for broad segments of the population? Why, according to innumerable surveys and public opinion studies, can we see growing disillusionment in democracy as conceived by liberal Western theories? This book aims to respond to these questions as well as others: Is democracy under threat today? Is populism an undeniable step backward for democracy? Why do forms of populism come into being? Are there moments in history in which democracy is put on a trial? What has the role of the new technologies and social media been in strengthening or weakening democracies?

The author expands on some of the answers to these questions. For example, she comments that, while it is the case that globalization has created higher levels of well-being in general and has reduced world poverty,

> Democracy and populism are not one-dimensional concepts; both depend on multiple theoretical, political, ideological, cultural, and even religious issues.

paradoxically, it has also created extreme concentration of wealth and huge socioeconomic inequality between countries and in societies. This has given rise to social polarization, which has increased because of the emergence and consolidation of digital social media; despite their promise of fostering unity and solidarity, they have really brought with them negative consequences. Among these are the formation of tribes or cocoons, large or small segments of users who are self-referential and have closed visions of reality, who, therefore, generate hate speech about all those that do not share their convictions or ways of life, about the "others," those who are "different." This creates fertile ground for the rise of the recent populist movements, both on the right and on the left, which at the same time may or may not become threats to democracy.

The book proposes an analysis of certain historic events to better understand the weight of the social and economic context in putting forward democratic ideals. For that reason, it compares the results for the development of democracy of the French Revolution and the U.S. War of Independence. It does this with the idea of showing how social conditions and political practices necessarily influence the way regimes are put together and how the types of democracy develop. It would be paradoxical, in this sense, as the author argues, to try to export or impose democracy, as some of the most conservative sectors of U.S. society have attempted to do. The author also extends this methodology of historical analysis to the reflection about the current moment, as she does when she looks at the two most controversial elections in recent U.S. history: those of 2000 and 2016. The former showed a nation that trusted in its institutions and, therefore, a place where conflicts are resolved through legal-institutional means and all the actors accept the outcome. However, the 2016 elections also alerted to the fact that

these same institutions can enthrone positions and movements that, paradoxically, threaten them.

Another of this book's merits is that it includes an epilogue in which the author explains why, despite their contradictions and imperfections, the battle to defend democratic institutions cannot wait. This defense must not be acritical, but it must be based precisely on the deliberation of the possibility of preserving what must remain and jettisoning —or at least pondering— everything that erodes the practices of the democratic state from within. For example, she maintains that the concept of majorities should be constantly reinterpreted and reconstructed with a historical perspective. Today, this implies finding ways of balancing market and state, reducing inequalities, and guaranteeing both individual and collective freedoms and

rights. Defending democracy and confronting populisms presupposes letting go of prejudices and stigmas, recovering the good ideas they might have, but at the same time combatting the concentration of power in charismatic leaders, who, most of the time, think that the ends always justify the means, regardless of the risks that this implies for individual freedoms and democratic societies.

This highly recommendable work offers many other contributions to the debates about democracy and populism, but space limitations make it impossible to enumerate them here. **VM**

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