

Citizens' Participation In the Mexican State

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THE APORIA OF THE MEXICAN STATE AND SOCIAL DEMANDS

The long history of civil society, its organizations and the government being at loggerheads is not accidental; it is related to the structure and operation of the Mexican political system in the last century, and, more recently, with the way crises and the transition to another political regime have been managed. Villanueva's ideas can help us to understand this better: "In the hegemonic and monopolistic structure of political mediation inherent in the post-revolutionary political system, the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) put itself at the center of relations between society and the government, taking over all society's tasks of representation and political participation. For this reason, civic organizations that by nature were different from, hostile to or reticent about these styles, principles or forms of political legitimation inherent in this system of 'legitimacy by negotiation' were excluded instead of democratically justifying themselves and making society move forward."¹

It is also useful to review what Alberto Aziz Naciff proposes: "Certain ideological arrangements become a culture and create institutions because they put

INTRODUCTION

One of the most recent examples of citizens' participation was the June 27 march in which thousands of people, outraged by the insecurity in Mexico City and the rest of the country, joined together to cry out collectively, aware of living in times of crisis, refusing to be dominated by confusion, demanding the right to exist and participate,

and showing their willingness to move forward to appropriate the public space and express legitimate demands about common concerns. This positions civil society in a different way because it is taking on demands and the tasks of a weakened state that had promised that Mexico was going to go through a substantial change and make dazzling progress. All of those promises have been mere speculation, because since 1982, when Mexico really opened its doors to the world economy, free trade, privatization and financial crises, intolerable poverty has been created.

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the revolutionary project into practice. Some of these symbols are free public education, the *ejido* collective farm, the agrarian reform, 'protection of workers', the corporatist structure of vertical control and, later on, the spreading coverage of health and housing policies. This was the basis on which the legitimacy of revolutionary governments was built, which for decades were 'popular', 'industrious', 'revolutionary'. They brought together a country and safeguarded its great transformations: from rural to urban, from illiterate to literate and from local strongmen to institutions....For decades, it was the state party and the presidency that kept the country together through pacts and rules —both written and unwritten— that were the basis for an authoritarian state and a closed economy."²

The parameters for looking at the government from the standpoint of society were stability and growth. Authoritarianism and society's lack of autonomy were "compensated" by a redistribution of wealth and peace in the public sphere. Votes in a ritual, non-competitive electoral system were shored up by corporatized sectors: the Workers Confederation of Mexico (CTM), the National Peasant Confederation (CNC), the Regional Worker Peasant Confederation (CROC), the different businessmen's associations, among others. In this country there was no democracy, no citizenry, no partisan competition, no freedom of expression, no open economy. There were no autonomous social actors and those that did exceptionally emerge were repressed: the railroad workers, doctors, oil workers and student movements.

What did exist was great class integration of popular coalitions, of economic and political elites, and a state with

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a revolutionary discourse and broad-coverage social policies, laws that were obeyed but not enforced, and a vision of time that very clearly established a revolutionary past, an institutional present and a future of progress and justice. In this country there was a view of the world, a PRI revolutionary hegemony that has come to an end.

In its place now we have fragmented visions, recurring crises, a citizenry-as-work-in-progress, ferocious competition for power, alternation in office (federal, state and municipal), an open, globalized economy, a highly polarized society, plus inhabitants living in extreme poverty with few alternatives for integrating themselves into development and globalization. Accompanying this model, we see guerrilla movements, crisis in the administration of justice and public violence and insecurity with political, social and family origins. So, revolution has been left behind and the country of democracy has not yet finished establishing itself.

In this context, we should ask ourselves what society's participation has been like and how society views the government, since the problems it faces about social demands are more and more complex and insufficiently attended to.

SOCIAL COORDINATION AND AUTONOMOUS LEADERSHIPS

The social coordination promoted by autonomous leaderships in Mexico has

its history, transcendence and specificities if we agree with Norberto Bobbio that civil society is the sphere of relations among individuals, groups and organizations that develop outside governmental relations of power.³

Villalobos says, "In civil society we encounter two large blocks: a for-profit sector identified with companies producing goods and services and the non-profit sector, which also organizes to offer goods and services to the community."⁴

Valdez and Hernández maintain that the history of philanthropy in Mexico has three differentiated periods: the first stretches from the colonial period to the time when public welfare institutions were established; the second is nineteenth-century philanthropy, mainly under the presidency of Porfirio Díaz; the third is philanthropy in modern Mexico. The last period is divided into four stages: relief (1950-1960); development (1960-1970); liberation (1970-1980); and criticism (1980-1990).⁵

The experiences of the Monte de Piedad Pawn Shop (founded in 1876) and the Mexico City Council for Private Relief (founded in 1889) were left by the wayside. In the 1960s, the United States created the Alliance for Progress to counter the Cuban Revolution's possible "expansionism." The Mexican Social Secretariat, founded in 1923, is the charitable arm of the Catholic Church; in the 1960s, it published the encyclical "The Progress of Peoples."⁶ At the same time, a large

number of civic organizations were created: the National Center for Social Communication, S.A. [Cencos]; the San Luis Potosí Women's Institute [IMES]; the Rural Development Training Center [Cecader]; the Mexican Community Development Institute [Imedec], etc.) and the bishops organized the Mutual Union of Episcopal Aid (UMAE).⁷

In the 1970s, two strains became visible among non-profit organizations: those that aid others and those that work to change the political, economic and social structures generated by poverty and injustice. This was how the Mexican Foundation for Rural Development and the first foundations created by banks like Banamex and Bancomer to promote culture were born.

Social activists, for their part, created Cencos, Popular Development Promotion, Peasant Action and the Center for Ecumenical Studies. The individual experience of Mexican intellectuals was brought to bear in the creation of Humani International and in the defense of urban spaces for art.⁸

The memory of 1968 and the 1985 earthquakes became milestones in the country's modern history. Given the government's inability to respond to the magnitude of the earthquakes' effects, thousands and thousands of people went out into the streets to solve the problem, very effectively and rapidly creating mechanisms to feed and house the victims and rescue people from the rubble.

Those were years of the emergence of new social actors and organizations, among them environmental and feminist groups, the self-organization of the popular and professionals' movements, the creation of networks, collectives and negotiating bodies.

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The 1988 elections marked the beginning of a new era in Mexico: the official party lost but denied the opposition its victory. In 1989, citizens of the Democratic Republic of Germany tore down the Berlin Wall; the Sandinistas lost the elections; and Mexico's "modernizing" project followed the path of neo-liberalism. The North American Free Trade Agreement coming into effect in 1994 brought with it the illusion of entering into the First World, and that same day, the Zapatista rebellion broke out. It was clear that we were not the First World, and that there are an infinite number of social gaps waiting to be filled and that the number of poor is increasing.

After the NGOs initial surprise at the emergence of 100,000 citizens' committees financed by the Ministry of Social Development (Sedesol), a consensus was reached to "influence in the design of public policies, promote them and monitor their implementation. The NGOs argue for the need to act as a counterweight to the authorities and as a social auditor of government action."⁹

For their part, international bodies, donor governments and cooperation agencies took other kinds of action, and the NGOs had to take on their proposals. Institutional life, then, was being strengthened. National networks were created, like for example Convergence (1990) and the National Council of Non-Governmental Organizations,¹⁰ the Forum of Mutual Aid (1992), the Civic Alliance (1994), the Mexican Human

Rights Network (1991), the Front for the Right to Food, the Civic Space for Peace (1992) and the Mexican Collective to Support Children. In addition, there were service clubs, the different businessmen's, religious, peasant, academic and cultural organizations.

In 1995, it was agreed that it was necessary to create a commission of citizen's participation in the Chamber of Deputies to discuss matters pertaining to the country's NGOs and their legal operating framework. A year-long consultation was carried out to write a bill. Six bodies are involved in the regulatory framework: the Senate, the Chamber of Deputies, the Ministry of the Interior, the President's Office, and the Finance and Foreign Relations Ministries.

Enrique Brito says that civil society emerged slowly but inexorably from the depths of social reality, participating increasingly and consolidating a national project more and more. He talks about a 30-year period from 1968 to 1998 with a logical sequence of social events: the 1968 movement, the October 2, 1968 massacre, the 1977 political reforms, the popular mobilizations and grassroots organizations in the 1985 earthquake, Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas's break with the Institutional Revolutionary Party in 1987, the 1988 democratic movement and the 1994 armed uprising.

Concluding that civil society's relationship with the government has not been either smooth or replete with mutual trust, its presence can no longer

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be overlooked. Civil society has moved closer to the legislative branch, because the latter has shown interest in finding out about the concerns, points of view and above all the many issues that these organizations work on: political reform, human rights, peace, street children, women, environmental problems, vulnerable groups, productive projects and poverty.¹¹

INVENTORY OF SOCIAL ORGANIZATIONS

The experiences of the Mexican Center for Philanthropy (Cemefi) (1995), the Mutual Support Forum (1996), the Ministry of the Interior (1994) and the National Social Development Institute (1998), among others, have been left behind by the reality of society. It is estimated that more than 8,000 non-governmental organizations exist in Mexico, including those registered as civic associations and public assistance institutions and those with no official standing. They work in different areas: health, social development, education, human rights, science and technology, art, productive projects, vulnerable groups, electoral monitoring and culture. However, traditional work more closely linked to relief and assistance continues to exist.

In 1968, A. Flower summarized the advantages of NGO work vis-à-vis that of governmental efforts: since they are centered on people, they have more skills for reaching the poor; they get

beneficiaries to participate; they find the correct ratio between development processes and achievements; they pick the right way of helping; they are flexible; they are skilled in experimenting; they are innovative, and they learn more quickly from their experiences.¹²

The new Law for Fostering Social Development Activities, which regulates civic organizations' activities, points out the importance of creating a legal framework to strengthen NGOs. It recognizes citizens' capability of organizing themselves autonomously for active, voluntary, solidarity-based collaboration in attending to the needy. The law stipulates that Mexico has a vigorous, growing number of civic associations committed to social welfare whose actions must be fostered by the state, and also affirms the need for a new relationship between the state and society based on legality and co-responsibility.

Citizens' participation is an effective tool in the implementation of public policy, and their actions have contributed experience and philanthropic capability toward achieving sustainable development that stimulates society's qualitative and quantitative growth. Recognizing this, we are now going to discuss, analyze and confirm that commitment, leaving behind the individualization of social processes and contributing to a new form of ordering society, building citizenship and superseding spiritual immaturity. This is because the Mexican state must be built side by side with its citizens, without

vacuums, without false prophets, now that social processes are no longer decided by dictum or force. ■■■

NOTES

¹ Luis F. Aguilar Villanueva, "Las organizaciones civiles y el gobierno mexicano," *Sociedad civil, análisis y debates*, 1997.

² Alberto Aziz Naciff, "Miradas de fin de siglo," *Sociedad civil, análisis y debates*, 1997, pp. 61-62.

³ Norberto Bobbio, as quoted by Jorge Grzybowski Villalobos, *Las organizaciones de la sociedad civil en México, visión general* (Mexico City: Cemefi, A.C., 1977), n/p.

⁴ *Ibid.*, n/p.

⁵ Cuauhtémoc Valdez Olmedo and Concepción Hernández Rodríguez, *Estado actual y perspectivas de la investigación sobre la filantropía en México* (Mexico City: Cemefi/Fundación Mexicana para la Salud, 1997).

⁶ "In 1967, in the encyclical about 'The Progress of Peoples,' Pope Paul VI said that development was the new name for peace and, prophetically, denounced capitalism as an 'evil system' and as the 'international imperialism of money.'" [http:// www.sjsocial.org/relat/60.htm](http://www.sjsocial.org/relat/60.htm) [Editor's Note.]

⁷ The Mexican Bishops' Conference (CEM) became interested in planning the work of its different bodies. A precursor in pastoral planning nationwide was the Mutual Union of Episcopal Aid (UMAE), which in the end grouped most of Mexico's dioceses and was later taken on board by the Episcopal Joint Pastoral Commission, charged with designing a National Pastoral Plan. [Editor's Note.]

⁸ Humani International is an institution created by Dr. José Jesús Fonseca Villa in 1970.

⁹ Rubén Aguilar Valenzuela, "Las ONG de desarrollo y democracia interna: una aproximación," Jorge Alonso and Juan Manuel Ramírez, comps., *La democracia de los de abajo en México* (Mexico City: La Jornada Ediciones/Consejo Electoral del Estado de Jalisco/Centro de Investigaciones Interdisciplinarias-UNAM, 1997).

¹⁰ A network that exists in 27 states and has more than 2,000 grassroots affiliates with different kinds of activities.

¹¹ Enrique Brito Velázquez, *Sociedad civil en México, análisis y debates*, 1997.

¹² A. Flower, "Non-governmental organizations in Africa: Achieving comparative advantage in relief and micro-development," discussion paper no. 249 (Washington, D.C.: Institute of Development Studies, 1968).