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Mexico's Populist Heritage

It is only one of the many ironies of history that in 1994 when Mexico seemed to confirm its determination to join the exclusive club of industrial countries by being admitted to the Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development, OECD, its political system appeared to be entering the pattern of cyclical change that other Latin American countries had followed for decades. A pattern in which, in order to escape instability, these countries alternated between authoritarianism and democracy, while in those same years Mexico succeeded in maintaining an impressive record of authoritarian stability under a democratic facade.

At present the Mexican political system is in a transitional phase characterized by the uncertainties, complexities and contradictions created by the persistence of an *Ancien Régime* that refuses to die, while a new political order struggling to take shape. The notion of transition has become closely associated with the general process of democratization. In the Mexican case however the notion of transition has a far less ambitious and positive meaning, because it only indicates a process of change the orientation of which is still undefined.

This development is the more surprising because since the end of World War II a higher degree of political institutionalization has distinguished Mexico from most Latin American countries. This characteristic of the Mexican system, epitomized by the sustained preeminence of an official party closely linked to the State, the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional*, PRI, has protected Mexico from the turmoil and unrest that has haunted other countries of the region.

However, in the 1980's the Mexican political system, like many other authoritarian regimes, was subject to the repercussions of a severe economic crisis and a deepening recession. These difficulties forced a profound reform of the Mexican State's participation in the economy. Inevitably, the reduction of the State's interventionism brought about a loosening of political controls and the weakening of authoritarian institutions. The counterpart of this evolution was an unprecedented politicization of Mexican society.

This phenomenon of autonomous political mobilization and articulation of diverse interests found powerful expression, first, in the emergence of numerous non-governmental organisations, and secondly, in a substantial increase in autonomous electoral participation. The 1988 presidential elec-

tion of 1988 reflected the initial effects of this phenomenon, when the candidate of the official party, Carlos Salinas de Gortari, met an unexpected challenge from Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, a dissident member of the political elite leading a multivariied coalition of opposition groups to the liberal reforms of the outgoing government, the continuity of which Salinas guaranteed.

The Salinas' government (1988 – 1994) was thus installed in the midst of a political crisis created by the serious accusations of fraud committed by the opposition. Although in a few months President Salinas was able to establish himself firmly in power, by vigorously exercising the presidential power which the constitution puts at his disposal, the official party did not regain full control of political participation and the precedent of the presidential election only accentuated the weakening of authoritarian institutions.

This process of change, an aspect of which was the dismantling of authoritarian institutions – for instance, through successive electoral reforms negotiated with the opposition – was originally seen in an international context dominated by the dismissal of authoritarian regimes.

However, on January 1st 1994, an Indian-peasant military uprising in the backward southern state of Chiapas triggered a political crisis that had a tremendous impact on the dynamics of an electoral year and cast an ominous shadow over the Mexican experience of reform. The confusion which these events introduced in a general situation of uncertainty was aggravated by the assassination of the presidential candidate of the PRI two months later. In March 23, Luis Donaldo Colosio was shot during a campaign rally. The crime had not yet been clarified when in September 28, after what had seemed to be a difficult but successful presidential election won by the PRI, political violence struck again at the political elite and shook many Mexicans' confidence in the system. That day the Secretary General of the PRI, José Francisco Ruiz Massieu was assassinated, apparently the victim of a conspiracy among resentful politicians. All these events added new elements of confusion to the general disarray. However, this delicate political situation seemed to be contained by the seemingly financial stability and the sound economic bases which the Salinas' government bequeathed to his successor, Ernesto Zedillo (1994 – 2000).

These developments have thrown an entirely new light on the processes of change that Mexico had experienced in the previous years. Until 1994 the optimists had described these changes as a process of democratization while the pessimists saw them only as part of a fragmentary process of liberalization; that is, a process that implies far-reaching changes, such as the dissolution of mechanisms that control participation and opens the door to political pluralism, but entails only limited change, because these changes do not automatically guarantee greater control by the ruled over the rulers (Loaeza 1994).

Moreover, to the extent that the notion of liberalization does not convey the sense of dissolution that has overtaken important areas of the traditional Mexican political system, the term deinstitutionalization seems more appropriate as a way describing the present situation. That is, a situation in which the behavior of political actors is dominated by short-term interests, an instrumental use of legality, the belief that conflict resolution is a question of the shifting balance of social forces more than of a fixed set of procedures or laws, and the deep-seated conviction that the new political order can only be the outcome of confrontation, given the fact that agreements concerning the rules of the game – i.e. electoral laws – are deemed by many to be superficial or insufficient.

This situation carries a high potential of instability and opens the door to antipolitics, that is to authoritarian actions and actors who do not differentiate the political sphere from the economy or the social structure. Antipolitical actors subordinate representation to participation, favor a direct relationship between leaders and followers, and show a not always well suppressed contempt for political parties and a system of checks and balances. Antipolitics clears the way for demagoguery and for antiliberal notions of democracy.

Here it will be discussed the process of deinstitutionalization that seems to have overcome the Mexican political system, in order to explain some of the powerful opposing tendencies that block the democratic option. It will try to identify the elements that launched this process and those that assist its development, recognizing that a tendency towards non institutional behavior and towards antipolitics has always been present in Mexican authoritarianism.

The article contains three sections: the first discusses Mexican authoritarianism, emphasizing the potential for non institutional behavior and antipolitics as incarnated in populism; the second section will present the evolution experienced by the Mexican political system from 1982 to 1993 as the unplanned effect of State reform; and the third section will describe the contradictions created by deinstitutionalization as a clash of political liberalism and populism.

Mexican populism: the non institutionalized area of authoritarianism

Authoritarianism in Latin America has two dimensions: one, corporatist, based on a vertical linkage between State and society, a pattern of articulation that "... entails a high degree of bureaucratization and formalization of social relations ..." (O'Donnell 1977: p. 67); and a second dimension far less institutionalized, in which organizations are pulverized by the personnalized manipulation of popular sovereignty based on a direct relation between the

leader and the masses. Here lies the politicized area of the State, where influence is more important than rules and procedures, and these are frequently altered by continuous accommodations of shifting groups, alliances and interests (Chalmers 1977: p. 25). Populist episodes develop in such an environment and in times of crisis this dimension overwhelms the political system.

The distinction made here between the two dimensions of authoritarianism, corporatist and populist, was established differently in the second half of the seventies, when a wave of military *coups* had put an end to democratic governments in several countries of Latin America and the weakness of the region's commitment to any form of government was discussed. (Malloy 1977) The distinction between corporatism and populism was then treated as having from a difference of approach between structural and policy-making perspectives (Malloy 1977: p. 3). Nevertheless, different approaches did not necessarily lead to contradictory explanations; to the extent that the object of analysis of each approach was one aspect of authoritarianism, they offered complementary visions of the same phenomenon.

In authoritarian regimes a high degree of institutionalization, concentrated in the authority of the State, can coexist with very low institutionalization, as exemplified by the weakness of the legislative bodies and of political parties, or by the pragmatic behavior of popular organizations. What should be stressed is that both aspects of authoritarianism – the institutionalized and the non-institutionalized – join in preventing autonomous organization or an overturn of the basic structures of society. Moreover, corporatism and populism can both be the vehicle for an active penetration of the State into diverse sectors of civil society, because both represent different forms for the conservative integration of the masses. These are forms of integration that entail the same kind of consequences: demobilization, cooptation and neutralization of autonomous political organization and participation.

Traditional analyses of Mexico's authoritarian regime have recognized the importance of populism in the success of the system, but they have tended to emphasize the corporatist organization of the various interest groups and their inclusion into the structure of the official party as the key to a sustained stability (Reyna and Weinberg 1977). However, this perspective shows only a partial picture of Mexican authoritarianism because the State has never had the means nor the will to corporatize all social interests and yet it has succeeded in neutralizing autonomous organizations and political participation. This it did without explicitly excluding any particular interest group from the structure of power, at the same time managing to sustain non-mediated relations with different social groups, which were conducted pragmatically. This area of the political system showed a very low degree of institutionalization.

Thus, for decades the Mexican political system functioned because of a balance between the corporatist and the populist dimensions: one in which the structure of power was highly institutionalized and centered around the PRI which incorporated functional non territorially-based organizations and workers', peasants' and many other special interests' groups. The latter non-institutionalized area was dominated by the power of the presidency, where personal influence and collective action and protest met the bonapartist, clientelistic patterns of regimes with a low degree of institutionalization. The populist dimension gave the Mexican political system a flexibility that seemed to be lacking in other authoritarian systems.

Whereas corporatism in Mexico has been widely studied, discussed and criticized as the pillar of undemocratic policies and practices, populism has not been dissected quite as thoroughly. This is because in Mexico, populism is closely associated with the revolutionary origins of the State and with the superiority of popular interests in the political discourse, a primacy that has been kept alive in the dominant political culture. That is to say, the appeal of populism in Mexico is deeply rooted in the strength of a political tradition, widely shared by a large number of Mexicans, that maintains a vigorous legitimacy and remains identified with the defense of popular interests.

The undemocratic traits of this particular form of political control, populism, have remained concealed under the democratic mask provided by revolutionary rhetoric. The importance of understanding populism in Mexico today is that it is one of the most powerful obstacles to democratization, and while in other Latin American countries an authoritarian regression "... can occur through a 'sudden death' via a classic military coup ..." (O'Donnell 1992: p. 19), in Mexico authoritarianism may be restored via the resurrection of populism. This option looks more viable than corporatism, as this latter dimension of authoritarianism was weakened by profound changes that transformed Mexican society into a complex collection of diverse groups, predominantly urban and with strong modernizing attitudes. Furthermore, corporatism was also the first victim of the economic crisis of the eighties and of the successful Mexican plan of stabilization, one of which substantial aspects has been wage control.

Populism seems to be as difficult to categorize as authoritarianism (Rouquié 1991). It is not necessarily linked to a particular ideology – although it is in essence antielitist and antiimperialist –, or even to a certain political form. It does not have a particular institutional expression, on the contrary, historically it seems to appear at times of institutional crisis when what is seen as an institutional vacuum is filled by the charismatic qualities of a leader, or his ability to win personal trust resorting to "... words and actions which convince influential people that (he) is capable of leading the country in 'the right direction'" (Chalmers 1977). According to all these general

characteristics populism is more a "way of doing politics" than a political regime.

Mexico was one of the cradles of populism in Latin America, first, because the Revolution of 1910, the origin of the political system, was fought in the name of the interests of peasants and workers who supported middle-class revolutionary leaders; and secondly, because the Constitution of 1917 achieved the formal integration of the masses into the political system by incorporating their demands into policies of State. These far-reaching commitments justified the building of a very strong State, that is the center of all political balances and that used to be also the engine of economic growth.

Thus, populism in Mexico was in power for most of the XXth century and for this simple reason it was never a rallying cry for antiestablishment movements, as happened in other Latin American countries. Mexican populism took this antiestablishment turn only in 1988, when it succeeded in bringing together a wide range of people and groups who opposed the liberal reforms introduced in the economy by the De la Madrid (1982 – 1988) and Salinas' governments.

The constitutional framework does not in itself explain the predisposition to populist policies in Mexico, but it favors the occurrence of these episodes because of the power and the relative autonomy of the State. However, according to the given definition of populism as a form of state-society linkage that shows a low degree of institutionalization, the Constitution should prevent these episodes. Nevertheless, the very same commitments of the revolutionary elite, together with peasants and workers, precipitated the building of a centralized structure of authority and of an extremely powerful presidency, that in the name of the underprivileged resisted any form of congressional or administrative limit to its policy-making decisions. In this arrangement all groups concerned, the president in turn and the mobilized masses of supporters who avoid institutional channels preferring a direct relationship with the supreme decision-maker, are normally inclined to a pragmatic approach that allows for more maneuvering – and can therefore be more beneficial – than does the application of the law. This is the "traditional way" of doing politics in Mexico.

If the legitimacy of Mexican populism is rooted in the 1910 Revolution, Lázaro Cárdenas (1934 – 1940) deepened its paternalistic accents by consolidating the belief that non-mediated relations between the State and the masses were the best protection for the latter's interests. The contribution of *cardenismo* to the shaping of Mexican populism was decisive. From his first months in office president Cárdenas invited peasants and workers to create their own organizations through which they could establish direct contact with the State. His reason was that he did not trust the official party which had been founded in 1929, because he saw it as an instrument of manipula-

tion of popular interests to the benefit of the political elite. Cárdenas believed that trade unions and agrarian leagues were an alternative to the neutralizing structure of the party. It was until later that he accepted the idea of these organizations being incorporated in the official party but only when the party had become a class-organization (Garrido 1978).

Given subsequent developments Cárdenas' influence on Mexican populism can be considered ambivalent because his government was responsible for the corporatist organization of business interest, and of the official party that until then had been a mere coalition of revolutionary factions. Nevertheless, at the same time president Cárdenas distrusted the bureaucracy, the official party itself, and preferred the powerful presidency that in Mexico has been the basis of personalistic policies and non-institutional arrangements. In 1940, at the end of his term he wrote: "In government one single political force must stand out: the force of the president of the republic, he must be the only representative of the democratic feelings of the people." (Córdova 1976)

The populist dimension of Mexican authoritarianism played a limited role in the maintenance of political stability from 1940 to 1970, when functional corporations and sustained economic growth kept demands for effective political participation at bay. However, Mexican populism came back in full force with the Echeverría government (1970 – 1976), after the repression of the students' movement of 1968 precipitated a severe political crisis by bringing to light the authoritarian nature of the Mexican system and by creating a situation favorable to the appearance of a significant *guerrilla* movement.

The political elite maintained its monopoly of power by destroying the *guerrilla*, and by resorting to reformist policies with a strong populist flavor. President Echeverría stimulated direct relations between himself and popular groups by inviting them and the middle-classes to by-pass the official party and the established corporations. He also "suggested" and promoted the organization of autonomous trade-unions and opposition parties, some of which eroded the power of the PRI within the political system. The economic elite became a favorite target of his inflammatory rhetoric, as well as bureaucrats and professional politicians, many of whom were replaced by "young rebels" who were ready to revitalize the Mexican revolution.

The Echeverría policies succeeded in preserving the presence in power of the heirs of the revolutionary elite, but the results of these policies were ambiguous in terms of democratization of the system. On the one hand new spaces for the opposition were opened in the political system, in this manner groups that would have otherwise opted for violent means of political change, were integrated into the institutional framework. However, to the extent that president Echeverría encouraged non-institutionalized, collective forms of

participation and protest. His reformism also served to keep alive suspicions among many Mexicans as to the effectiveness of institutions.

In terms of political stabilization the populism of Echeverría was a success. Thanks to the *apertura democrática* Mexican authoritarianism received a new lease on life because it brought about an enlargement of the political arena by the inclusion of new actors, and this was achieved within the established patterns of policy-making. Echeverría's populism also put an end to the notion that political participation was in itself a source of instability, an idea that had been one of the pillars of authoritarianism and that reigned over Mexican politics until 1970. The students' movement had shown that non-participation could be just as disturbing because it could lead to threatening explosions of social unrest. Therefore, the profound meaning of this populist episode was the recognition that political participation could be a component of stability.

However successful Echeverría's political populism was its economic costs were so high that they threatened to jeopardize the whole strategy. Like similar experiences in other Latin American countries, populism is associated with the expansion of public expenditure namely in social services such as education and health, but also with subsidies to popular consumption and low prices of public services (Bazdresch and Levy 1992).

Income distribution is a central element of the populist paradigm (Dornbush and Edwards 1992); nevertheless as populist leaders promise immediate satisfaction of popular demands they normally try to achieve goals as ambitious as social equality by resorting to the means at hand, for instance, State interventionism and expansionist policies (Dornbush and Edwards 1992). In the case of Echeverría's government, and later on of José López Portillo's (1976 – 1982), this meant an extraordinary increase in the external debt, rocketing rates of inflation and confrontation with the private sector (Bazdresch and Levy 1992). These tensions appeared because populist economic policies tend to ignore budgetary restrictions, and reject the notion of economic efficiency or macroeconomic balance. Neither do populist economic policies recognize the need for negotiation or coordination between economic agents; decisions are taken unilaterally by the State and its agencies.

The, the essential weakness of populist episodes lies in the politicization of the economy, that is, in the fact that economic policy-making is subordinated to the supreme objective of preserving the power of the political elite (Hirschman 1978). This, in Mexico as in other Latin American countries, led to financial crisis, fall of real wages, capital flight and unemployment. Populist macroeconomics normally have a detrimental effect on the income of those who were supposed to benefit from it. All this is possible because on the one hand, there is a powerful presidency that, given a low degree of institution-

alization, is not subject to a system of checks and balances. In economics as in politics, populism rejects the limits that can be set by sound institutions such as an autonomous central bank, an effective Judiciary power or a strong Congress (Rabello de Castro and Barcio Ronei 1992: p. 198).

The economic sequels of these populist episodes were so dramatic that, as the crisis of 1982 showed, they also compromised the continuity of the political system itself. In that year presidentialism seemed unbridled, decisions were taken by-passing institutions and groups sustained by the sheer authority of the State. All this provoked a very strong reaction from many different social groups who then started questioning the basis of Mexican authoritarianism itself: the legitimacy of State power. In this context it was only natural that, in order to regain some public trust, one of the first steps taken by the De la Madrid government was the introduction of constitutional reforms that fixed set limits to the economic responsibilities of the State; that is, the De la Madrid government recognized the dangers of non institutionalized power for the institutionalized dimension of the Mexican political system.

Mexico's political liberalization: the unplanned effects of State reform

Between 1982 and 1993 the Mexican political system underwent a substantial transformation, the essence of which was the evolution of public opinion within the structure of power: from being almost negligible in those years public opinion became a central element of the political balance. The crucial importance of this phenomenon lies in that it was the basis for significant changes: it set limits on the State's autonomy, that is, on its ability to impose decisions it had taken without consultation; most importantly, the unprecedented influence of public opinion animated different kinds of political participation, individual and collective, electoral and mobilizational, in the ballot-box and in the streets. All this brought a qualitative change into a political system that until then had made of apathy and non-participation, that is of the negation of politics, a fundamental support of authoritarianism.

There are two general explanations for this change: first, the evolution of the political culture as expressed in a new political behavior of the middle classes. These groups had benefitted greatly from the expansionist policies of the previous governments – Echeverría and López Portillo -. The unprecedented prosperity they enjoyed in the seventies bred among them new attitudes towards political authority and their own ability to participate in the processes of policy-making. Thus, when in 1982 the Mexican economy seemed to sink in an unending crisis, these groups were ready to overcome

conformity or passivity in order to defend their interests in a deteriorating situation over which the State seemed to have lost control. Secondly, the weakening of the Mexican State itself. At first this weakening was seen as an effect of financial bankruptcy, however when government critics and powerful opponents – mainly in the business community, signaled that the main responsibility for the crisis lay in presidentialism, their questioning deepened public distrust of State's authority. The increase of autonomous political participation and organization was the counterpart of the weakening of the State.

The international context did not favor a repetition of previous experiences in which political discontent had been neutralized by populist policies. First, the sources of international credit had been shut off, and secondly, the wave of democratization that since the end of the seventies had swept through authoritarian regimes across Europe and Latin America, brought into question the validity of "special solutions" and insisted on the superiority of multiparty systems and electoral mechanisms as the only legitimate democratic option. These circumstances set the limits for the De la Madrid and the Salinas' governments.

Political reform seemed as urgent in 1982 as it had six years later. However, both De la Madrid and Salinas concentrated their efforts on economic reform convinced that, since inflation and the recession were at the origin of the expressions of political discontent, stabilization and recovery would suffice to calm down the protest and limit the influence of the many opposition groups that sprang in the eighties and that after 1988 grew by the number.

Thus, the dismantling of authoritarian political institutions was result of economic constraints in the State and not the result of a liberalization plan, much less part of a democratization process. So, if the economic weakness of the Mexican State inevitably entailed its inability to maintain traditional forms of political control, the so-called neoliberal economic policies opened the door to a more liberal political environment, not because political liberalization is a *sine qua non* of economic liberalism, but because the State can no longer afford the costs of authoritarianism. This means that in contrast to previous experiences of liberalizing measures in Mexico, the changes of the last twelve years have escaped the control of the political elite. More clearly so during the Salinas' administration.

In the case of the de la Madrid government what seemed to be a political opening, as expressed in greater tolerance of the progress of party opposition and in a new electoral law, was seen by the authorities as the price to pay for the earlier application of harsh measures to bring about economic stabilization. Thus, in the years 1983 – 1988 electoral opposition became the most favored means of expression of political discontent, benefitting particu-

larly *Partido Acción Nacional*, the long-standing conservative opposition party, traditionally identified with antistatist, *anticardenista* positions. This party was founded in 1939 at the height of *cardenismo* as a minority reaction to the extension of the State's authority.

The electoral mobilization that assured PAN a number of local governments in the wealthiest regions of the country, Chihuahua, Coahuila, Durango, Sinaloa, was effected under the call of antipopulism and denunciations of the so-called State's illegitimate interventionism in society and the economy. PAN appeared to be so influential that at the time, many observers believed that the Mexican political system was undergoing a relatively soft transformation that would turn it from a dominant one-party system into a two-party system. However, those who predicted this evolution tended, on the one hand, to overestimate the democratic appeal among the middle-classes and the strength of *Acción Nacional*, and on the other hand, to underestimate the legitimacy of the State and of the populist tradition in the Mexican political culture.

While for many upper and middle-class groups PAN represented a moderate option that could oust the PRI from power without disturbing fundamental social balances, for many others a political spectrum dominated by the PRI-PAN competition, meant that the country had fallen in a narrow scheme that offered only conservative options: neoliberal antipopular *dela-madridista* policies and antipopular *panismo*. In spite of its well earned image of independent democratic opposition, *Acción Nacional* did not gain the support of the popular classes who could not identify with it. In 1985, at the peak of its influence, PAN received only 20% of the vote in federal elections. Thus, it was not surprising that the impulse the party had gained in these years by capitalizing protest and discontent was tempered in the 1988 presidential election by the candidacy of Cárdenas whose movement rallied an important proportion of the *antipriismo* that had been cropped by *Acción Nacional*.

In spite of contradictions and weaknesses the political system remained in place even after 1988 due to the continuity of the State, the presidency and of the official party. Nevertheless, this period was important for the delegitimization of authoritarianism because it offered a context for the evolution of beliefs and perceptions. Two basic notions acquired a new meaning: the vote became much more than a symbol of democratic commitment and was turned into a concrete instrument of political change or negotiation; and plural democracy established its superiority over the notion of majoritarian democracy, a revolutionary legacy that for years had justified the claims of the PRI to *quasi* political unanimity.

The electoral history of contemporary Mexico is a swampy terrain: Mexico used to pride itself on the fact that in contrast to other Latin American countries since 1920 the change of government had taken place according

to schedule and to constitutional rules. True, elections were held regularly and until 1988, when the PRI won painstakingly with over 50% of the vote, its hegemony was sustained on impressive majorities of over 70% of the national vote. But electoral processes were not decisive because the power struggle took place within the official party itself, before the actual election.

For most of the XXth century in Mexico the electoral sphere was not "... a critical locus of decision-making as regards the important issues facing the nation ..." (O'Donnell 1992: p. 22). This is to say, for decades parties and elections were a marginal area of the political system. Among other things this meant that in order to obtain those majorities the PRI resorted freely to all sorts of schemes of electoral fraud. All this went unpunished because elections left most Mexicans indifferent. This story explains why today in Mexico the credibility of the electoral processes and authorities is one of the central problems for the building of democratic institutions.

The reevaluation of the vote introduced uncertainty into the electoral processes, an element that had been absent from Mexican elections; it also encouraged political participation, politics in a political system that had always maintained the primacy of administrative goals such as economic development over any kind of ideological preference. Political incertitude introduced party competitiveness and pushed many Mexicans to political participation. The electoral results did not reflect the importance of this change until the 1988 federal election. According to these, PAN appeared as a regional party with limited presence, that was practically absent from the countryside, the home of over 35% of the population; moreover, in 1988 the turnout in the presidential election (51%) was lower than in 1982. Nevertheless, the path of a political change centered on party politics and elections was confirmed in the 1994 presidential election in which the rate of participation reached an extraordinary 78%.

However, the impact of the *panista* progress in the eighties, on large clusters of public opinion was great because it proved the vulnerability of the official party; on the other hand, notwithstanding the evidence, since 1988 of electoral participation is considered a percentage more realistic than the 65% of 1982 because the general political awareness has made manipulation of electoral results more difficult.

The clash of political liberalism and populism

In Mexico the form of democracy that has prevailed for most of the XXth century derives directly from the revolutionary experience. It is a form that imposes the wish of the majority, which until 1982 gave the Mexican State, the president in turn and the PRI the authority to impose decisions and to

restrict the representation of minorities in the name of the "people". More than thirty years of civil war and political unrest (1910 – 1940) left a profound dislike of politics in large parts of Mexican society. The painful experiences of the past consolidated the belief that political homogeneity was a condition of stability, and at the same time it sustained the belief that participation was in itself a source of conflict. Thus, for decades Mexican authoritarianism had also the support within Mexican society of claims to political unanimity and of negative attitudes toward political participation.

The De la Madrid government was the first to admit that Mexican society was composed of a variety of heterogeneous groups, that were also seeking a legitimate pluralist political expression. This vision inspired the electoral reform of 1986 but its importance lay in the fact that this was the first official document in which the notion of a pluralist society substituted the majorities of the revolutionary tradition.

In December 1988 Carlos Salinas took office in a better economic context than his predecessor six years before. The government had succeeded in negotiating an economic pact which reduced the rate of inflation, it had also reestablished the private sector's trust in the ability of the State to orient economic activity, and overall it offered a more stable horizon.

However, the significant support for the *cardenista* coalition in 1988 proved that economic reform was insufficient, particularly for those who had paid most of the costs of the stabilization policies: the workers, the poor and the unemployed (between 1983 and 1988 real wages fell 40%). The contested results of the presidential election, the claims of victory of Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas and his allegations of electoral fraud created an explosive political situation that seemed to demand thorough political changes. Many observers believed that the end of the uncontested electoral hegemony of the official party meant the end of Mexican authoritarianism, and that the political system was on the threshold either of liberalization or of democratization.

On acceding to power president Salinas committed his government to a profound reform that would create the institutional framework for the development of an effective multiparty system and the liquidation of the virtual monopoly of the official party, the PRI. This engagement was taken under the pressure of a disconcerted and divided public opinion, the continuous refusal of Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas and many of his followers to accept Salinas as the legitimate president of Mexico, an increasing mobilization of non-institutionalized groups, the self-denominated "social movements", and general confusion.

For the first time since the triumph of the Revolution in 1920, the party in power now needed the support of another party, in this case Acción Nacional, to rule the country and to respond to the very serious challenge posed by *cardenismo*. This represented a real threat to the PRI because Cárdenas

stood for the populist tradition that has been abandoned in 1982 and whose control over the Mexican State, according to the *cardenistas*, was usurped by technocrats and neo-liberals. Cárdenas is more appealing to the dominant political culture than any liberal message.

The Salinas government had to be stabilized, from the beginning of its term, faced an emergency situation which had to be stabilized. Two different types of strategies were taken: one, in the area of institutions, the other, in the traditional "way of doing politics". Thus, the government initiated negotiations aimed towards the institutionalization of the opposition by modifying electoral procedures in order to guarantee clean and fair elections. In spite of serious progress in this respect, all of the reforms, four in less than six years – 1989, 1991, 1993 and 1994 – proved to be ineffectual. However, it is noteworthy that none of them was a unilateral proposal of the government; they were the outcome of difficult and painstaking negotiations with opposition parties, namely PAN. This fact alone contrasts with the past when political reforms were, on the contrary, proposed by the president of the republic and discussed and voted on by an uncontested *priista* majority.

The second strategy for political stabilization followed by president Salinas was more traditional. In order to reestablish political control he made an extensive use of presidential prerogatives. For instance, the celebrated program to alleviate poverty, *Programa Nacional de Solidaridad*, PRONASOL designed in 1989 was a recognition of the general impoverishment of the population resulting from six years of crisis and stabilization policies. The program needed no further justification than the state of Mexican society: in the year 1982 – 1989 GDP fell 14% and the country's poor grew from over 32 to more than 41 million (Tello 1991) but the expenditure to satisfy basic needs also had not very well concealed political intentions, and the success of *cardenismo* in 1988 was probably decisive in the adoption of the program.

According to some critics PRONASOL was particularly generous in the regions that had voted for the opposition in the presidential election. (Dresser, 1991) Whatever the influence of the revival of populism in the opposition may have been, it is undisputable that PRONASOL contributed greatly to a resurrection of presidentialism. Originally the program depended directly from the president's office with the explicit purpose of circumventing bureaucratic obstacles; thus, PRONASOL was seen as a personal project of Salinas until in 1992 it was integrated into one of the ministries *Secretaría de Desarrollo Urbano, SEDUE*, which later became the *Secretaría de Desarrollo Social*. This was done to support the career of Luis Donaldo Colosio, who was the first appointee at the head of Sedesol and who in November 1993 was to be handpicked by Salinas as PRI's presidential candidate.

To many observers the political intentionality of PRONASOL was made evident by the electoral recovery of PRI in the federal elections of 1991. By

then the crisis of 1988 seemed to have been overcome: president Salinas had gained popularity as an effective leader who had sent to jail corrupt union leaders and enriched stockbrokers alike. He kept inflation under control, completed negotiations with foreign creditors and undertook a program to combat poverty. He also continued to negotiate new values with the opposition for an eventual transformation of the political system. That is, Salinas went ahead with the modernization process that had been launched by his predecessor but in contrast with De la Madrid, Salinas indulged in a measure of populism. He was, in fact, so much acceptance among the public that the 1991 federal elections, in which PRI regained the majority obtaining over 60% of the vote, were interpreted by many as a plebiscite on the Salinas'-presidency.

In terms of the process of deinstitutionalization the resurrection of presidentialism was strongly felt in the dealings with the opposition, which is precisely the area where the institutionalization efforts were concentrated. The contradiction was very strong and while Congress discussed, elaborated and voted a new set of electoral rules, to solve post-electoral conflicts led to occupation of public buildings, marches, hunger strikes and a wide variety of extraparlimentary expressions of protest. Salinas resorted to face-to-face negotiations, mainly with *Acción Nacional* leaders, to impose *ad-hoc* solutions and maintain political balances, even by-passing rules and institutions recently created. In this manner the vote, and consequently political parties, was undervalued in the face of direct contacts and collective protest.

The other antiliberal reaction: social movements and the Mexican populist tradition

During the Salinas' administration, the Mexican experience of political change seemed trapped in authoritarian continuities that showed no sign of exhaustion, many of which relate to the populist tradition of doing politics. In spite of economic crisis and presidential unpopularity, populism is firmly rooted in the attitudes, habits, expectations, symbols and values that compose Mexican political culture. Until 1982 it had been monopolized by the Mexican State, although it provided a common language for State and society. When it was abandoned during the De la Madrid years this common language disappeared, but the tradition was picked up by Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas in 1987, and in the period 1988 – 1994 it was a bone of contention between Salinas and Cárdenas.

Salinas made an extraordinary effort to recover the populist torch. However the continuity of liberal economic policies deepened the antiestablishment accents of Mexican populism. Never before had populism been in the

opposition in Mexico, as it is today. This will become a permanent trait in the years to come, given the commitment of Salinas' successor, Ernesto Zedillo, to economic continuity. Furthermore, the sudden and violent financial crisis of December 1994 has been seen by the opposition as proof of the failure of the liberalization of the economy, and it will probably be used to reanimate populism as the only possible alternative in the face of the foreseeable economic adversity. This will add to the impetus the Chiapas rebellion gave to this political tradition.

The reanimation of populism in Mexico in the last six years is even clearer if social movements are integrated in the analysis. This type of political actors have always been present in the Mexican system, they have developed in its non-institutionalized area that is more sensitive to the balance of social forces. An area dominated by collective protest, direct contact with the Executive, and strategic combinations of legal and 'extralegal' struggles (Foweraker 1993).

The problem with populism is that it is a powerful obstacle to the establishment of rules and the consolidation of representative institutions that are the essence of liberal democracy. In the case of Mexico these continuities are represented by presidentialism, but also by the political personnel, a number of whom went to the *cardenista* opposition and by the "predominant style of doing politics" (O'Donnell 1993: p. 36), which bears a strong resemblance to the Brazilian style as described by Guillermo O'Donnell in the analysis just mentioned.

In Mexico, as in Brazil, the political system has not collapsed, it has been gradually transformed but it maintains clientelistic and prebendalist traits, the survival of which may be explained by the relative benignity of the populist dimension of authoritarianism, thanks to which institutions could be bypassed, legal restrictions could be bent and budgets spent liberally. All this created an environment favorable to the social movements.

Social movements are a category difficult to define, but the notion normally refers to self-defense groups that "... resist state power and top-down development ..." (Lachenmann 1993: p. 73) with no continuity, form of institutionalization or integration in the established structures. In Mexico they have a long-standing tradition that has been sustained by sheer effectivity. Moreover, the vitality of this type of political actor is a reflection of presidentialism and of the historical weakness of political parties, in particular opposition parties.

However, the growth of social movements in Mexico in the eighties was correlative to the weakening of corporatism – as a side-effect of the success of antiinflationary policies –, the diminishing resources of the PRI and the friendly attitude of some governmental authorities who privileged a pragmatic approach in conflict resolution. The 1985 earthquakes of Mexico City created

a context that encouraged the appearance of this type of political actor: defensive, filling in where institutions do not exist or fail, territorially-based, it articulates immediate demands that could be satisfied by the parties. This type of actor prefers an unmediated relationship with the authorities.

Whereas in other countries these social movements could be seen as a "counterpower", in Mexico many of them did not aspire to that position. They were an alternative to the official party, and a more powerful mechanism for dealing with the authorities.

After 1988 there was an explosion of diverse social movements in Mexico which demanded to become "... legitimate players under new rules of the game" (Fox and Hernández 1992: p. 166). Thus, they were not seen as a temporary substitute for political parties, as it happened in other Latin American countries where the action of social movements was a decisive first step towards democratization. Once political parties were restored social movements ebbed (Escobar and Alvarez 1992: pp. 2 – 4)

Contrary to what might be expected from anti-institutional actors in an authoritarian context, the existence and effectiveness of these social movements do not necessarily contribute to a democratization process. In the case of Mexico their relationship with the State "... deepens and complicates the institutional penetration and control of ... society ..." (Foweraker 1993: p. 146). Social movements are therefore more vulnerable to cooption and manipulation than established organisations.

The impact of social movements on the chances of a democratization process has been magnified and generalizations on this matter tend to minimize the importance of particular or local conditions. This is particularly important in the process of building a multiparty system. Social movements may share the demands of opposition parties, they may even establish temporary alliances with them, as it has happened in Mexico with the *Partido de la Revolución Democrática*, PRD, but they maintain their profound distrust of parliamentary institutions, therefore there is a persistent tension in the relationship between parties and social movements (Fox and Hernández 1992).

This tension is only a reflection of the differences between a political party, an institution that functions according to an agreed set of rules, and a social movement that develops in an institutional vacuum and that derives more benefits from the lack of rules than from regulations. Whereas a political party has everything to gain from institutionalization, institutionalization is the nemesis of social movements, therefore this type of political actor has no interest in such a process.

The path of political change in Mexico in the last six years has followed a difficult and at times erratic course. Political traditions die hard, even more when they are challenged by a modernization project that implies the exclusion of

social groups whose identity is still defined by those same traditions. This persistence is noteworthy, because in Mexico this tradition is populism and, as has been discussed here, authoritarianism breeds populism, which in turn and given its antiinstitutional overtones, is profoundly antidemocratic.

Abstracts

Der autoritäre Korporatismus des postrevolutionären Mexiko wird generell als ein hochinstitutionalisiertes Regime beschrieben. Dieses politische Regime ruhte allerdings von Beginn an zusätzlich auf einem komplementären, nicht-institutionellen, populistischen Standbein. Seitdem jedoch die letzten „makroökonomischen Populisten“ (Echeverría und López Portillo) durch die Generation neoliberaler Technokraten (De la Madrid, Salinas de Gortari und Zedillo Ponce de León) abgelöst worden ist, hat der Populismus seinen Status als staatstragende Ideologie verloren. Einst unumstrittenes Monopol der Staatspartei ist Populismus heute zum Markenzeichen der politischen Opposition geworden, zum Banner sozialer Bewegungen, aber zum Teil auch der linksoppositionellen Partei der Demokratischen Revolution.

At the beginning of the 1990's the Mexican political system seemed to be entering a pattern of political unpredictability from which it had escaped in the past. The origins of this new situation can be traced back to the 1980's when the country faced an economic crisis of unprecedented dimensions. The policies of economic adjustment and restructuring of the State found an important echo in the political sphere. The weakening of State interventionism brought about a loosening of traditional political controls that opened the door to independent political mobilization and liberalization. But this process has also awakened populism, a deeply rooted political tradition with which many Mexicans still identify. Thus, in Mexico, the main threat to political change comes from its own populist past which was for years a solid pillar of authoritarianism.

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