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↳ Behind the Scenes - Clientele and Citizens in the Mexican Political Transition

1. The decomposition of the ancient Mexican political regime

In contrast to most authoritarian regimes in Latin America, which were basically military and anti-popular, based upon a coup d'Etat that overthrew a national-popular regime such as those existing in Argentina and Brazil (established in the thirties at about the same time as the one of Mexico), the Mexican regime had enough legitimacy to endure until the year two thousand. Nevertheless, its legitimacy capital began to quickly run down with the change of economic model as a result of the economic 1982 crisis.

The Mexican political regime drew its legitimacy from its revolutionary (nationalist and popular) origins. Its institutionalization was achieved at two different moments: the first in 1929, when the party which was to rule for the next 71 years was created, the second in 1938, when the elite party was transformed into a mass party. The precursor of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) was conceived as a mechanism to allow the ruling elites to negotiate and solve their differences institutionally, rather than through the violence that had characterized prior power transmissions. The founding of the National Revolutionary Party (PNR) institutionalized the power struggle. In 1938, during the presidency of Lázaro Cárdenas, a mass party regrouping the popular sectors: trade unions, peasant organizations and other popular organizations, substituted this elite organization.

The fact that in the old regime the State was the main agent of development, together with the way the regime was constituted, basically as an institutionalization from above, left society in a subordinate position. The government spoke in the name of the people and accumulated attributions that allowed it to control the different social organizations that were part of the pact. It concentrated the capacity to intervene in the activity and internal affairs of trade unions and peasant organizations: it had the faculty of accepting or denying the registry of a specific union or peasant organization as well as its leadership, of deciding upon the legality of strikes and collective negotiations between employers and workers. The pact also created the institutional framework that allowed the reproduction of the regime through clientelism and the cooptation of the independent organizations and leadership, and finally through selective repression of the more radical elements.

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The corporatist pact survived until the 1982 crisis, when the economic capacity of the State reduced dramatically. From this date on, the State was obliged to give up its role as agent of development, something that implied the reduction of its investments and eventually forced the opening of the Mexican economy. This situation had as its consequence a radical decrease in the capacity of the corporatist regime to continue giving privileges and subsidies to its bases: the workers of the most strategic economic sectors (most of them owned by the State) and the social agricultural sector (the ejidos).

This situation eventually led the government of De la Madrid (1982-88) to altogether abandon the nationalist and popular project. Although this eroded the legitimacy of the State and of the regime, as well as of the popular organizations they were based on, it did not radically change the control faculties of the State upon the social organizations that constitute the PRI. Although the retreat of the State profoundly reduced the capacity of the PRI organizations to control their membership in clientelistic terms, the State maintained the tight administrative controls and the allegiance of most of the officialist leadership that established itself during the more than 50 years that the regime had been in place. This allowed the government to impose drastic austerity measures and the restructuring of the economy with little resistance on the part of the popular sectors.

During the presidency of De la Madrid, the Mexican government once again modified the character of the political regime without changing its nature. It again changed the alliance: it was now the entrepreneurs that were to be the beneficiaries of the intent to make the Mexican economy more productive and more competitive at the international level. The same strategy was followed by Salinas, who had success not only in abandoning the popular character of the original alliance, but also the national one. With the signing of NAFTA, what changed was that the government sought the North-American capitals as partners in order to incorporate the Mexican economy to the international arena, rather than rely on the national entrepreneurs.

There was, nonetheless, a crucial difference between both presidencies. At the beginning of his presidency, De la Madrid thought that the PRI would be able to appeal to the urban and middle classes in order to win elections, by advocating a realistic and technically correct management of the crisis, instead of depending on the clientelistic and popular support the regime. The first signs showing that this strategy was a failure were the local elections in Chihuahua in 1983, where the PRI practically lost all the major cities, precisely where this more urban and middle class population lived in. The result was that the government had to abandon this strategy and once again rely on the traditional corporatist leadership and on electoral fraud, such as the one of 1985 in Chihuahua and of 1988 at the national level.

When Salinas took office after the contested elections of 1988, the governmental strategy changed radically. He discarded the idea that the PRI would be able to stay in power based upon a more solid experience of government, while its traditional bases were left behind. On the other hand, the possibility of continuing to win elections through fraud was drastically reduced in a context where the government had to face a more conscious and better-organized civil society and greater vigilance from the international scene. Salinas's government intended to maintain the support of the traditional corporatist apparatus, although it functioned less and less effectively, until it was ready to substitute it by other organized social forces and eventually establish a new party apparatus.

Because most of the legitimacy of the original alliance was extinguished, and both the State and the popular organizations were showing less capacity to deliver privileges to the most strategic popular organizations upon which the corporatist pact was based, the government of Salinas again changed the character of the regime in order to convert it into a basically clientelistic pact targeted to the poorest sectors of society. The government established the Solidarity program in order to substitute a clientelistic structure mediated through the corporatist organizations, by a clientelistic system linked to the presidency, that would directly relate the “agency” that concentrated the economic resources in Mexico to “organizations” based upon a primary identity, defined by their living quarters and their immediate needs (Zermeño 1994).

Nevertheless, the project of constituting a clientelistic State to substitute the corporatist one, was condemned to fail in the mid-term, as it further weakened the organizations and institutions of the national-popular pact. Although this clientelistic State functioned conjuncturally¹, it was not capable of generating a durable new alliance between the State and society, nor was it capable of refurbishing the regime with legitimacy. This was not possible because the clientelistic pact was built upon conjunctural and particularistic needs and not upon longer lasting interests or projects.

This intent to constitute a clientelistic pact independent of the organizations of the national-popular pact not only failed to establish solid popular organizations, but actually contributed to sap the former of the legitimacy they still had and greatly affected their efficacy. On the other hand, it also contributed to eventually weaken the presidency as it was evidenced during the administration of Zedillo.

The political and economic crisis of 1994 made it clear that the intent to constitute a clientelistic pact had failed. The region where the indigenous Zapatista Army of Liberation (EZLN) appeared had been the one receiving the most resources from “Solidaridad”. On the other hand, the presidential candidate of the PRI, who had been the director of program, was assassinated in March. His substitute, an economist who had been secretary of Education, Ernesto Zedillo, reduced the Solidarity program to its minimum, abandoning the political project of the previous administration. On the other hand, the remaining institutions of the national-popular regime, such as the Mexican Institute of Social Security (IMSS) and the CONASUPO –an agency that subsidized the prices of agricultural products both to producers and consumers– started being dismantled. All of this had the effect of continuing to sap the ancient regime of its content, further weakening the traditional clientelistic instruments, and making the Mexican State less and less capable of controlling the process of political liberalization.

This process further slid from the control of the incumbents when, as a result of the 1994 crisis, the weakened position of the Salinas government, and the pressure of the opposition parties that had strongly contested the elections of 1988, an agreement between the three major parties was reached to create an autonomous institution to organize the elections that were previously organized by the government; although for the elections of 1994 the Federal Electoral Institute (IFE) still maintained the secretary of the Interior as its president. This last element was changed in 1996, when the present IFE was created,

¹ It assured Salinas the majority of the legislative body in the mid-term elections of 1991, which permitted him to reform the Constitution in order to reaffirm his economic project.

with complete independence from the government; with 9 counselors, recommended by the major political parties and voted by Congress with a two third majority. All this amounted to the fact that in the year 2000 we would face an election where the PRI would not be able to control the outcome of the election and would have relatively less capacity to offer permanent clientelistic advantages to influence people's votes.

In this manner, the principal factor of power of the Mexican political regime, the presidency² was being strongly eroded. The Mexican constitution had given the Mexican president an array of ample power instruments. But even more importantly, during the more than 70 years that had elapsed since the centralization of power in the twenties, the presidency had been able to accumulate an enormous amount of meta-constitutional attributions, that in other political systems is in the hands of other institutions. The incumbent president could choose its successor, act as an arbiter in the political disputes between members of his party, decide most of public policies, initiate most of the law making procedures, name the Supreme Court judges, and act as the main distributor of benefits. When all the governors and the great majority of members of the federal and state assemblies came from the PRI, the President could easily control the whole political scenario. He could threaten the governors with a censorship motion at the Senate and force their resignation, he could absolutely control the legislative process and the judiciary system by nominating the Supreme Court and other high-ranking judges. In addition, the head of the Bank of Mexico was part of the presidential cabinet and not an independent body as it is today.

Since the second half of the eighties, but especially during the last PRI presidency of Ernesto Zedillo (1994-2000), these extraordinary faculties suffered a reflux (Meyer 1996). Part of them went to the Chamber of Deputies, some to the PRI itself, and still others to the governors of the PRI and of the opposition parties. Even before the PRI lost the presidential elections in the year 2000, it had already lost more than 10 States to opposition parties, one of them Mexico City; Mexico's largest city, where 25% of the population lives. In addition, although in many states the PRI still exerted the executives, it no longer controlled the local legislatures, and many municipalities were in the hands of opposition parties. In the 1977 elections the PRI lost the majority of the Chamber of Deputies, which meant that the President could no longer modify the Constitution as he had done so often before. This change also implied that Congress would no longer limit itself to pass the initiatives that came from the presidency.

With the weakening of the PRI at the national and at the local level, the president lost his grip on his own party. The governors of the PRI gained increasing autonomy with respect to the Presidency. At the beginning of the Zedillo presidency the PRI of Tabasco rebelled against the federal government in support of its governor (obviously controlled and manipulated by him). It stood up against the agreement that the Zedillo administration had reached with the opposition parties to sign a comprehensive political agreement that included the deposition of the governor of Tabasco (who had arrived to the governorship after a dubious campaign and election) and made it fail. It is this same governor, Madrazo, that in the year 2000 forced Zedillo to accept to hold a primary election for the first time in the history of the PRI, and ran against the "official" presidential candidate,

² On the power of the presidency see Cosío Villegas 1972 and González Casanova 1965.

Labastida. It is this same governor who succeeded in having his local candidate elected in similarly dubious elections in August 2000, and imposed an interim governor when the Federal Electoral Court annulled the former election.

This rebellion of the Governor of Tabasco was not isolated; other governors of the PRI followed. The governor of Yucatán, Victor Cervera Pacheco, succeeded in reelecting himself in elections marked by many irregularities; the main one being that he had already served as interim governor during the previous four years, something that legally impeded him from running again. This same governor is at present the main protagonist of a serious electoral conflict, which this time involves the rejection of a decision by the Federal Electoral Court. Nevertheless, it was not only the governors that showed their autonomy from a weaker presidency, but also other organizations that had been easily controlled by the presidency and the PRI in the past. After the death of the Secretary General of the largest trade union confederation of the country, the Confederation of Mexican Workers (the CTM), the government of Zedillo failed to impose a modernizer at its head, and one of the most traditional leaders was elected.

As far as this means that the power formerly concentrated on the presidency has diminished and counterweights to the executive have been created, it is a positive evolution. Nevertheless, what this also means is that we are living a process of feudalization of political power in Mexico, a dispersion of power that is having as its consequence that in some regions (Yucatán, Tabasco, Campeche, among others) and organizations (the CTM, the CROC, the CROM) political power is falling in the hands of the most traditional leadership, that have been active in resisting the process of democratization (Bizberg 1999). In effect, although the democratization of the country started in certain localities and regions, mainly in the Northern and Northeastern part of the country, the local level now mainly serves as the refuge of the traditional politicians that have waged the war against the more reformist ones: the technocrats that gained power during the 1982 crisis. The technocrats that presented themselves as the only ones capable of solving the economic crisis (in part because they had the support of the international financial agencies that were to allocate the enormous amounts of loans the country needed) had until the presidency of Salinas the capacity to control the party apparatus and the traditional politicians. With the weakening of the PRI at the national level (especially now that it has lost the presidency), the strongholds of the traditional politicians will be these local governments and organizations, from where they will try to recuperate not only the National PRI that is still in the hands of the allies of the technocrats, but the presidency.

In addition to the dispersion of the power that was concentrated on the presidency, there has been a process of generalized weakening of the popular organizations under the control of the PRI. The labor, peasant and other popular movements depended on a corporatist relationship with the State, through which political support and control of the demands of the popular sectors were exchanged for economic and political privileges for the leadership and clientelistic benefits for workers and peasants. From 1982 on, this situation had to be reversed, first because the intervention of the State receded, then because the Mexican economy opened and imposed an increased international competition on the Mexican companies and the countryside, when the country entered GATT in 1986.

The generalized weakening of the corporatist organizations that mediated between the State and the social sectors occurred in a context in which the State-PRI maintained

its administrative and political control mechanisms almost untouched and continued exerting its hegemony over the (reduced) resources to distribute goods (public works, living quarters, drainage, water, electricity, etc.)³. This fact did not permit that the decreased legitimacy and representativity of these organizations translate into massive popular opposition. In its turn, this means that the power vacuum created by the decomposition of the corporatist regime is not being filled by the emergence of independent popular or civic organizations, but on the contrary, by the local “caciques” resulting from the feudalization of the PRI and by the strengthening of openly illegal forces trafficking with drugs, migrants, stolen cars, smuggling, kidnapping, etc.

2. Civil society and the Mexican transition

Some transitions have seen massive social movements against the old regime, such as Poland, with Solidarity, and to a lesser degree Brazil, with the organized entrepreneurs and workers. Other transitions have been the consequence of the massive organization of civic associations, such as the Hungarian, or of the spontaneous emergence of civil society as the Czechoslovakian and East German. Still others have been mainly the effect of the decomposition of the old regime, such as the case of the ex-USSR. Although the Mexican has also been dominated by the decomposition of the “ancient regime”, it has partly been the result of the pressure of political and social forces that questioned its legitimacy. In order to evaluate the capacity of the Mexican society to reconstruct a political regime after more than 30 years of decomposition of the ancient one, we will have to review the capacity of civil society to organize itself and struggle against the old regime.

2.1. *Labor and peasant organizations*

As discussed above, the regime was based upon an alliance with the popular sectors that eventually derived into a subordination of these sectors and their organizations to the State. Nonetheless, this relationship of dependence of the labor and peasant organizations to the State was also characterized by periodic outbursts of discontent. One of the most massive movements was the upsurge of independent trade unions and peasant organizations of the early seventies. Although this movement was short lived and did not contribute much to actively dismantle the old regime, it was crucial to show the limits of the capacity of independent movements to organize in Mexico, as well as the difficulties of the regime to refurbish its legitimacy and renew its control over its social basis after the 1968 conflict.

These movements were also very important in questioning the subordination of the unions to the State and the existence of a leadership that responded first to the directives

³ Neither the Federal Labor nor the Agrarian Laws have changed. On the other hand, the government continued to maintain its control over most of the urban popular organizations, although this was the sector where other parties like the PRD (with the Asamblea de Barrios in Mexico City) and the PT (in cities in the North of Mexico) more efficiently contested its hegemony.

of the government than to the demands of the workers. They also questioned the lack of democracy within the unions, as well as in other popular organizations, as the main support for the existence of this type of leadership. That these were the main reasons for the emergence of this broad movement of union independence and not economic questions is proven by the fact that although the presidency of Echeverría had a contradictory economic balance, not only wages reached a historic high in 1976, but the government established various institutions directed to subsidize housing and furniture for the workers and distributed large amounts of good, arable land.

These independence movements (Basurto 1983; Gómez Tagle 1980; Middlebrook 1989) started in the economic sectors that had gone through a process of modernization, that had the most complex production and organization processes, and that correspondingly required more qualified, better schooled, and younger workers. Among these sectors were the automobile and auto-parts, electronic, airlines, telephone and electricity industries, and education services. In the countryside, the movement began in the regions that had experienced the fastest development, such as the extensively irrigated and highly exporting regions of the Northeastern part of Mexico.

This pressure for change in some popular sectors coincided with the will on the part of Echeverría's government to accept and even encourage it. This attitude of the government was crucial because the Ministry of Labor has such a great capacity to intervene in the internal questions of union and peasant organizations, especially regarding the decision to accept or reject the result of an internal election favoring an autonomous leadership and the decision of a union to leave an official confederation. In fact, the government of Echeverría actually induced the liberalization of the popular organizations. A few months after taking office the president affirmed that worker's assemblies had the right to freely choose their own leadership and to decide to which Confederation they wanted to pertain.

The fact that the more salient and active leaders⁴ leading the movement were closely linked to the government, made the movement of "worker's insurgence" (*insurgencia obrera*) more and more dependent on the attitude of the government towards it. This had as its consequence that as soon as this latter changed its attitude, the movement lost its impetus. This occurred when, nearing the end of his term, president Echeverría was forced to increasingly rely on the traditional leaders to face the economic crisis that occurred in 1976, as well as to have the capacity to impose his candidate to the presidency, as was the tradition in the PRI governments. The government had to stop supporting the independent movement in order to regain the support of the traditional popular leadership. And as soon as it did so, the movement stopped short. The next government, that of López Portillo, decided to recuperate the confidence of the Mexican and foreign entrepreneurs, helped the officialist union movement to recuperate the still existing independent unions.

Although the movement was stopped short at its peak in June 1976, when the army prevented a strike of its main actor, the "democratic current" of the electrical workers union, the SUTERM, the prestige of the officialist popular organizations was gravely

⁴ Such as the electrical workers union –the STERM– and the Union Obrera Independiente that organized most of the automobile unions that had left the CTM.

attained, something which further eroded the legitimacy of the corporatist organizations. Their legitimacy further declined due to their unconditional acceptance of the austerity measures and the retreat of the State beginning 1982, that hardly hit the workers and the other popular classes. This process went on with their incapacity to defend the workers from the consequences of the decision to open the Mexican economy, which gave way to a profound process of enterprise restructuring.

The independent peasant movement (Gordillo 1989; Harvey 1990; Robles & Moguel 1989; Sanderson 1981) was much more easily defused, due to its atomization. In the first place, each of the organizations representing a group of peasants usually fought individually to get land. Then, once it obtained it, usually through invading a terrain, claiming its property and forcing the authorities to expropriate it, it subsided. During the government of José López Portillo (1976-82), the financial resources coming from the petroleum exports decreased the pressure coming from the independent organizations that had received land during the previous presidency, which were now demanding resources to sow and commercialize their product. On the other hand, the government repressed or was successful in marginalizing the organizations that were still demanding land and that had united in the National Confederation "Plan de Ayala" (CNPA) against the intent to put an end to the Agrarian Reform.

During the administration of Salinas, the main independent peasant organization: the UNORCA⁵, was finally coopted by the government of Salinas, by backing its leader in his effort to attain the direction of the National Peasant Confederation (CNC). This apparent triumph of the independent union against the officialist leadership turned out to be the end of the autonomy of the most important independent peasant movement of the seventies and eighties. The fact that under the leadership of the UNORCA the CNC did not react, and even backed, the 1992 reforms of the Constitution that put an end to the Agrarian Reform and gave peasants the possibility of selling their ejido lands finished completely discrediting this organization. It was further weakened when it was time to contest the opening of the country to imports of maize and beans, signed in the NAFTA agreement.

In this way, in these last thirty years, the successive PRI governments managed to revert the impact of the upsurge of the independent unions and peasant organizations, and to restore the domination of the officialist organizations, through administrative and legal mechanisms, as well as through cooptation and repression. On the other hand, the capacity of the State to maneuver and fill the organizational space with its own organizations, has made social movements to tend to rely on elite agreements with the Mexican Presidency, that always turned against and delegitimized them. Both of these situations have produced short-lived alternative social movements and organizations, even though the legitimacy and pretension of representativity of the officialist organizations has been continuously worn out.

⁵ This Organization resulted from the unification in the government of De la Madrid of the independent organizations that got land during the Echeverría government and that were now fighting for better economic conditions for their products, as a reaction to the drastic reduction of subsidies for the peasantry after the 1982 crisis.

Nevertheless, we might well be at present seeing a germ of change in this relatively closed situation. The creation of the National Worker's Union (UNT) in 1997 has been a qualitatively fundamental event in the history of the workers movement in Mexico, as it is the first confederation created independently of the State. This organization grouped some of the most active unions in the country: among others the telephone worker's union, the union of the Volkswagen plant in Puebla, and the airline workers unions. They have surely managed to exert pressure on their own enterprises, in order to get much higher wages and benefits than the rest of the trade union movement. Nevertheless, they appear to have limited their organization to defend exclusively corporatist interests, because their action has been restricted to their own enterprises. This impression has been reinforced by the fact that they have not led an important movement opposing the neo-liberal measures taken by the last three PRI governments, nor against the authoritarian political regime led by the PRI. In fact, the leader of one of the most important unions of the Confederation, the Telephone workers union, is a member of the PRI and had an explicit alliance with former president Salinas, which led many observers to think that he was trying to emulate what the UNORCA did in the CNC, and conquer the presidency of the CTM through an agreement with the government. The fact is that the UNT has not been able to expand considerably its membership to other important unions, and that it has been incapable of quantitatively altering the correlation of forces in the trade union movement.

Thus, in contrast to other Latin American or East-Central European transitions, where organized labor movement was crucial for the democratization of the regime and society, organized workers and peasants in Mexico have expressed their opposition to the regime only in some rare occasions, and almost always under government control. On the one hand, the PRI has managed to occupy most of the political space and preserve the loyalty of the popular organizations to the ancient regime. On the other hand, independent organizations either fell in the trap of trying to ally with the government in order to achieve power from above, or have adopted a critical but corporatist position. This prevented the appearance of a strong organized opposition against the regime, allowing the PRI to control the rate of political liberalization and make the Mexican transition one of the longest in the world.

In fact, most of the worker's, peasant and popular (taxi drivers, street vendors, etc.) organizations are still loyal to the PRI, even after it lost the presidency. The big question is whether these organizations will continue to ally to the ailing PRI, or if they will start experiencing a growing discontent from their bases, that may eventually lead them to abandon this party. Nevertheless, our main question deals with the fact that if we accept that there is more to a transition than mere elections, and that democracy means the capacity to reconstruct society in terms that allow and habituate society to solve conflicts peacefully while respecting differences, the control of the social space by the State is a great obstacle.

2.2. Civic and social movements

The most influential civic movement in Mexico in the last thirty years has surely been the 1968 student movement. More than in any other country in the world, the stu-

dent movement in Mexico was more political than cultural. Although the movement had salient cultural traits, it soon became fundamentally political (Zermeño 1978), because it encountered the authoritarian regime at the peak of its consolidation. The consequence that it adopted a political character and began posing the democratization of the Mexican regime as its main demand, was that it derived into a direct confrontation with the government. The result of this situation was the well-known massacre of students in Tlaltelolco in October.

Although this movement constitutes a crucial moment in the history of Mexico, and has a very strong symbolic significance and a durable impact on the political culture of the political and cultural elite, it was weakly organized. This characteristic meant that after the repression, it not only failed to institutionalize, but practically disappeared as a movement. It was only 7 years later, in 1975, that some of the leaders participated in the creation of the professors' union of the National University. Then in 1977, the Mexican Communist Party was legalized as part of the political reform of the López Portillo's administration. These two events were in many ways influenced by that movement. Nevertheless, the more immediate result of the way the State responded to the students was the expansion of the guerrilla movement that had emerged in the early sixties in Chihuahua, in the North of Mexico, and in Guerrero.

Other successors of this movement were the ample array of non-governmental organizations that emerged in the nineties, and that met in Mexico City in the "National Citizen Organizations Encounter" of 1995. The 568 organizations of that reunion were dedicated to the most varied questions: women, human rights, electoral observation, services to the handicapped, gay and lesbian rights, prostitutes and aids patients support, rural development, ecology, etc. (San Juan 1999). The contribution to the organization of civil society and to the promotion of the economic, social and political aspects each of these organizations occupies itself is more than evident. Moreover, most observers also agree that they greatly contributed to prepare the defeat of the PRI at the 2000 elections.

The organizations devoted to electoral observation at the local level between 1991 and 1994 finally coincided and convinced other NGO's dedicated to other questions, that it was urgent to unite their efforts in order to observe the Federal elections of 1994. These presidential elections were to take place in very critical conditions: after the zapatista rebellion and the assassination of the presidential candidate of the PRI. This seemed to forebode an extremely complicated and perhaps dangerous outcome if they were not completely transparent. This is what convinced a considerable number of NGO's to organize a civic alliance (Alianza Cívica) to observe them.

Alianza Cívica thus gave an important step to become a net of NGO's capable of influencing Mexican politics. In fact, it was their pressure that achieved the creation of a totally independent electoral institution: the Federal Electoral Institute⁶, after the 1997 elections when the PRI lost the majority at the chamber of deputies. Other important contributions to the democratization of the country by the Civic Alliance, were that it helped to increase the awareness of the population on the importance of elections, implemented the first experiences concerning direct democracy in Mexico (it organized the first inde-

⁶ The IFE existed since 1994, although it was not totally independent because the Minister of the interior acted as its president.

pendent citizen consultations and referendums), and began a campaign to demand accountability from government functionaries, including the president (Ramirez Sáiz 1997).

Nevertheless, this NGO movement did not try to lead the opposition struggle against the ancient regime, as it did in other countries such as Hungary and East Germany, and partly also in Czechoslovakia and Brazil. In Mexico, Alianza Civica decided that it would maintain its neutrality with regards to the political scenario. It meant to be an organization dedicated to observe elections and eventually organize citizen consultations on topics of national interest, without taking sides. This “neutrality” made itself most apparent when it rejected the appeal of the zapatista rebellion in 1994, demanding that civil society takes sides with it against the regime.

The neutral stand of Alianza also determined that this NGO net did not institutionalize into a permanent organization, which would have allowed it to have an influence in the aftermath of the elections. This was evident from declarations on the part of some of its leaders in the sense that once the elections were organized by an independent and citizen controlled institution, the civic alliance had practically lost its *raison d'être*. At this point, it was more important to act at the political level in order to press for laws to insure human rights and limits to State action⁷.

In this manner, although the Mexican NGO's were very active and achieved a degree of organization that was crucial to focus attention on the elections, which finally decided the defeat of the PRI, the fact that they never adopted an open opposition stand to the authoritarian regime made them lose momentum in the aftermath of the July elections of 2000. They thus contributed to make the transition possible, without ever acting directly against the ancient regime. They nevertheless contributed to increase the density of civic society.

Another important civic movement is the Barzón (Mackinlay 2000; Torres 1997; Williams 1996), which was originally organized by medium and small agricultural producers in defense of their property threatened by their financial situation in the mid-nineties. At that moment, conjunctural and structural events coincided to make it impossible for them to pay their debts. This movement started in 1993 with tractors blocking downtown Guadalajara and the international bridge linking Ciudad Juarez, Chihuahua with El Paso, Texas. Up until the end of 1994, the Barzón maintained its fundamentally agrarian identity. But the financial crisis of December of that year and the increase in interest rates to more than 100% in 1995, led thousands of middle class credit card, automobile and housing debtors to join the movement.

With its expansion into the middle class the Barzón managed to persist throughout the administration of Zedillo; continuously contesting the financial policy of the government and obliging it to decree three different plans intended to reduce and restructure their debts. The movement also managed to prevent massive expropriation of debtor property by the banks. Nonetheless, the most important accomplishment of this movement was that, although it did not explicitly demand the democratization of the regime, it clearly contested its technocratic and authoritarian character. In this respect, the pressure it exerted throughout Zedillo's administration, led Congress to radically modify the law

⁷ Interview with Sergio Aguayo, March 2000.

sent by the executive in order to convert the FOBAPROA⁸ into public debt. The Barzón exerted enough pressure on the legislators to force them to proclaim a law that would allow Congress to investigate some of the larger debts to inquire if a fraud was committed. It also achieved substantial discounts for small and medium sized debtors, which the government programs had not included.

In this manner, this movement questioned one of the most important policy measures of the Zedillo government, the banking system bail-out, contributing to further wear out the legitimacy of the regime and to increase the prestige of the opposition parties. Nevertheless, as many of the middle class members of the Barzón and some of the peasants saw their economic expectations turn brighter with the final financial plan and the economic growth of the last years of the Zedillo administration, the movement lost its momentum.

The most important social movement of this period, and probably since 1968 was surely the zapatista rebellion of 1994 (Harvey 1994; Le Bot & Subcomandante Marcos 1999; Leyva 1995; López Monjardin 1999). This movement has both a social and a cultural element. It also has an ethical character as it represents the demands of the most marginalized sector of the Mexican society, rather than the defense of corporatist privileges that are being retrieved, as most other popular movements do. Although the indigenous population was supposed to be integrated in the national-popular project, after the presidency of Cárdenas it was permanently marginalized with regards to other sectors like labor or the rest of the peasantry. In fact, in order to get what was promised to the indigenous population but was never delivered, they had to fuse into the peasant organizations, adopt the generic peasant identity and abandon their cultural specificity.

The zapatista movement does not arise from a sector of society that has been relegated by the new economic project or that has lost the support of the Mexican State. It is rather a sector of society hurt by erratic public policies that have rendered difficult its modernization efforts. The zapatista rebellion does not come from the poorest and most marginalized of the indigenous population, but from a sector that has tried to organize itself and modernize in economic terms. It represents those that tried to modernize the culture and commercialization of coffee in the Lacandón Forest, but failed due to the indiscriminate opening of the Mexican economy and of the complete lack of governmental regulation.

They also arise from the frustration that has resulted from the systematic repression of the independent peasant associations by the government of Chiapas, and of the cooptation of the most important regional organization: the Union de Uniones de Chiapas (later ARIC). This situation has systematically blocked all legal channels of representation, and implies the destruction of the legal organization efforts on the part of the population of the region, rather than a desperate position (Le Bot, *op. cit.*).

The Reform of article 27 of the Constitution by the Salinas government with the acceptance of the national peasant organizations, that signified the end of the Agrarian Reform and allows for the dismantling of the existing “ejidos”, has not only endangered the basis of the efforts of economic modernization of the indigenous population, but the material basis of their identity. It thus marked the end of their disposition to erase their

⁸ The Fund for the Protection of Bank Savings is the program set to save the Mexican banks after the debt crisis of 1995.

differences in order to fight for their rights as peasants through the agrarian organizations, and determined their will to fight for their economic and social demands through the affirmation of their identity.

In contrast to other Mexican and Latin American guerrillas, from the very beginning the zapatistas did not set themselves to take over power, but rather to oust the Salinas government and allow the Mexican Congress to define a new government and the modification of the economic model. On the other hand, their concept of identity, difference and democracy are not determined in exclusive terms. They pose an inclusive rather than an exclusive concept of identity; which is dominant in other contexts such as that of East and Central Europe and the Middle East. The EZLN holds a concept of democracy that goes beyond elections, that implies the capacity of society to accept all the existing identities and projects, without assuming the disappearance of the differences. It does not oppose indigenous to national identity, but supposes that the existence of the nation, like that of democracy, depends on the acceptance of all the existing different identities. This point is especially pertinent in an international context where national identities tend to be erased in order to impose a globalized homogeneity, and has been the fact determining the ample international impact of this movement.

Although this movement is the most comprehensive social movement of the last decades, its violent origin and the fact that the Zedillo government managed to limit it to its military character by encircling it with the Mexican army, dramatically reduced its capacity to extend to civic society and become an open social and political movement⁹. It was nevertheless crucial as a catalyzer of the electoral reform of 1994 that created the Federal Electoral Institute, and thus greatly contributed to the democratization of the country. The situation seems to be changing dramatically with the long march of the "zapatistas" to Mexico City in February-March 2001, where they have shown the capacity to not only represent the indian population of Mexico, but have shown they have the potentiality to become an ample movement against the economic project established since the 80's, that the government of Fox continues to apply.

2.3. *The entrepreneurs*

Although the popular and social movements prepared the ground for the transition, they did not play a central role as in other contexts such as the Brazilian and the East European (Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary). The central role was in many senses reserved to the entrepreneurs (Alba 1997; Luna, Tirado y Valdés 1995; Puga 1993). To understand their intervention it is necessary to go back a few years, to the beginning of the seventies. The government of Echeverría not only liberalized the relationship between the State and the popular organizations that were its social basis, but in so doing alienated one of its main economic allies: the entrepreneurs. The attitude of the Echeverría government

⁹ This situation is dramatically changing in the present time, with the will shown by Fox's government to dialogue with the zapatistas, and the coming of its leaders to Mexico City. We are thus probably on the verge of seeing the EZLN becoming a political movement, which would represent the indigenous population, and maybe other marginalized groups, with a large support of civic society.

towards the popular organizations and the aggressive rhetoric against private capital opened a new front against the old regime, which in retrospect resulted decisive.

The Mexican entrepreneurs had been traditionally subordinated to the authoritarian political regime and to the economic project. They were economically dependent on a State that acted as the main agent of development for almost 50 years (from 1936 to 1982), stimulating economic growth and closing the economy from international concurrence. Politically, the Mexican regime assured social peace, necessary to assure their investments and interests, by controlling the popular sectors, *per se*, and by preventing labor from exerting excessive pressure on their benefits when demanding better salaries and working conditions.

Both dimensions of the relation between the State and the entrepreneurs began to change at the beginning of the seventies. A more mature entrepreneurial class, that had expanded during the almost 30 years of continuous economic growth, began to contest the economic terrain occupied by the State. This conflict became most acute during the presidency of Echeverría, when the State significantly increased its investment and the regulation of the economy. One of their first battles was fought against the government's project to impose a significant tax reform, which they managed to abort.

On the other hand, the basic political warranty the regime gave the entrepreneurs began to fade away during the same period. As part of Echeverría's strategy to reaffirm the popular basis of the Mexican political regime, the president began to rhetorically attack the entrepreneurs. In addition, the support given the independent unions and peasant organizations resulted in significant strike waves and land invasions, that were seen as a threat by the Mexican entrepreneurs. This led to open recriminations against the government, that reached a high point when in 1973 the guerrilla assassinated one of the most prominent entrepreneurs of the country, Eugenio Garza Sada, leader of the Monterrey group. At his burial, the Garza family openly accused the president of having created an opinion against entrepreneurs that had shaken social peace in Mexico.

The clash between the entrepreneurs and the State did not subside after this event. On the contrary, it increased forcing the employers to transform their organizations that were subordinate to the State in a similar manner as the labor and peasant ones, into closer representations of their interests. One of the main events in this respect was the creation in 1975 of the Employers Coordinating Council, a centralized organ representing all the entrepreneurs, that were usually divided between sectors. The clash reached a new high when the day before Echeverría left office, he expropriated a large extension of some of the best lands of the country in North East Mexico, in order to constitute one of the largest conglomerates of collective farms (*ejidos*).

From this moment on, the entrepreneur's perception of the Mexican regime changed. And as in other transitions, the entrepreneurs (in this case mostly small and mid-sized) adopted a definite opposition stand against the authoritarian regime. They realized that although the regime had been an essential factor of political stability that had perfectly suited their interests, it could revert against them. This feeling was increased tenfold when the government of López Portillo that had succeeded in regaining their confidence by dismantling the independent unions, putting an end to land invasions, generously compensating the expropriated lands, and pursuing an economic policy favorable to their interests, nationalized the banking system, three months before leaving office in September 1982.

The entrepreneurs thus realized that their traditional attitude of exerting pressure on government through their organizations in order to force it to give them a better treatment had become ineffective. The definite proof had been the fact that during the administration of Lopez Portillo everything they had achieved had been reverted. From then on, the entrepreneurs decided to recur not only to their corporatist organizations, but to participate directly in politics in order to struggle for the transformation of the regime.

The participation of the entrepreneurs was mainly achieved through the National Action Party (PAN), which eventually won the presidential elections that culminated the electoral dimension of the transition. In fact, from 1982 on the entrepreneurs contributed in creating a new current inside the PAN that distinguished itself from the traditional members of this party in that they were more pragmatic, less dogmatic, prone to negotiate with the government in order to gain power positions, rather than conceiving their activity as an example to politically educate the Mexican population (Barraza/Bizberg 1992).

Although the activity of the Mexican entrepreneurs in the transition process was partly against the intervention of the Mexican State in the economy, that was competing with their interests, their main rationale was political. The impulse to directly enter politics was designed to defeat an authoritarian regime that had gone from protecting the interests of the Mexican entrepreneurs to attacking them through arbitrary measures. On the other hand, the fact that the entrepreneurs basically responded under a political rationale, resulted in greatly strengthening the PAN, to the extent that the current they led eventually won the elections against the PRI, and became the “winners” of the transition and the main resource of functionaries of the new government of Vicente Fox.

3. Conclusions

We accept the idea that democracy is more than a transition from an authoritarian regime that does not hold elections to another regime that warrants a free and competitive electoral system. That transition to democracy refers to a broader process of restructuring society in the sense of establishing social relations (through the action of social associations, organizations and movements) and increasing the capacity of society to work upon the conflicts that social life inevitably generates. Democracy also implies that social conflicts are solved in institutional and peaceful terms, respecting identities and differences. This means that one of the indicators of democracy is the existence of a dense civic society, be it organized through civic associations, class organizations, or social movements. Both class and social movements have to be capable of self-restraint in order to allow their institutionalization as Touraine and Arato have posed. Finally, institutionalization does not mean to solve conflicts by way of dissolving social differences, but to construct (in Berger and Luckmann's terms) socially accepted ways of working upon differences by constituting what Sabel has defined as constitutional orders. This helps us to discuss the characteristics of the Mexican transition toward democracy.

The main characteristic of the Mexican transition is that although the autonomous organizations and movements that emerged succeeded in eroding the legitimacy and stability of the ancient regime, they were not decisive to bring it down. The ancient regime in Mexico did not confront a social movement such as Solidarity, or the insurgence of

civil society, like in Hungary, Czechoslovakia and East Germany, or the combined action of the entrepreneurs, the union movement and the NGO's in Brazil.

In consequence, the Mexican transition seems to lack the social forces to attain its completion. It differs from the Latin American, where the civilians dismantled the old institutions once the military left government and went back to the barracks. It also differs from some Central European cases, where the absolute lack of market and political institutions, forced the new social and political organizations to construct the economic and political institutions at the round tables and through the elaboration of new constitutions. Moreover, although the Mexican regime was profoundly worn-out, it did not collapse like the Communist regime of the Soviet Union.

We have seen that most of the organized social forces: unions, peasant and other popular organizations, have been effectively controlled by the State until the present. On the other hand, although the organization of civil society has advanced considerably (as witnessed by the hundreds of NGO's created and the success of "Alianza Cívica") and there two very important social movements emerged (the Barzón and the EZLN) in the last years, for different reasons neither of these has been able to take the lead of the struggle against the ancient regime. This has meant that there is no social movement able to capitalize the defeat of the PRI and have the necessary impetus to dismantle the old regime.

The demise of the old regime in Mexico was basically the consequence of the development of the electoral system. What actually happened is that the balance of the electoral-political just tipped against the ancient regime. The fact that the electoral victory was the result of a diffuse (although broadly generalized) rejection of the old regime and of a very loose and unorganized alliance of electoral attitudes, is a sign of the fact that there is no sufficiently strong social power or coalition to force the necessary dismantling of the institutions of the ancient regime and the construction of the new ones. The fact that the popular classes are still basically under the control of the PRI, or are too weak to have a real impact on the reconstruction of civil society, means that a restoration is one of the possible scenarios. This will be so unless the opposition, now government, and the real opposition (other than the PRI) can find the social basis needed to demolish the institutions and organizations this party still controls and to occupy the spaces vacated by the PRI.

Nevertheless, the capacity of the PRI to continue controlling the popular organizations may change with the electoral alternance. The great question is if notwithstanding the loss of the presidency, the PRI will manage to maintain under its control the popular organizations without the aid of the State, or if we will see the dispersion of these forces and their passing to the opposition. But this question does not only have to do with the existence of an opposition inside these popular organizations controlled by the PRI, but also with the manner in which the government led by Fox will or will not continue using the mechanisms of control of the popular organizations in the hands of the State, that the PRI governments used exhaustively. In the case of labor, for example, Fox's government may be tempted to make use of the ample faculties of the Ministry of Labor in order to control the trade unions and favor economic stability sacrificing their democratization. On the other hand, the legitimacy of the PRI may be refurbished if the government continues to apply neo-liberal measures without an effective social policy. We have witnessed how this evolution in the case of Eastern Europe led to the return of the communist party into power. The aggravator in the Mexican case is the fact that most of the institutions of the ancient regime are practically intact.

Nevertheless the most probable scenario is that the neo-liberal measures, accompanied with obstacles to social organization will further weaken civic society. The fact that the main actor of the Mexican transition is the entrepreneurial current of the PAN will probably have further consequences. On the one hand, the fact that the pressure of the entrepreneurs on government passed through politics and that the worker's unions were maintained subordinate to the State and almost absolutely quiescent through all these years when the new economic model was implemented, contributed to maintaining the employers and their organizations as paternalistic and as opposed to workers unions as ever. On the other hand, the conception that the entrepreneurs in government surely will be individual, rather than collective, electoral rather than social. This coincides with the way in which the PAN has governed in the states it has won elections. Society is seen as a conglomerate of individuals that have to invest themselves individually in order to progress. Government has to be organized so as to deliver services efficiently to this society of individuals, and to paternalistically help those who cannot be considered as citizens (due to poverty, lack of education, health, etc.), and eventually educate them in order to realize what their real interest is. This means that they consider citizenship in purely individual terms, as the right that people –conceived as clients of government services– have to complain against, or change, the functionaries in charge of these service-rendering institutions. In this perspective, conflict is not an inherent part of social life and it does not require collective solutions nor social organization. It is conceived as a default, a sign of inefficiency on the part of government. Social conflicts are also seen as ways through which political forces instrumentalize individuals. They are thus conceived as a disruption of normal social life.

This posture towards society may mean that the decomposition of the authoritarian and corporatist regime that has dominated the Mexican transition may continue, and that during Fox's presidency the central power factor of the old regime, the presidency will continue losing its grip on the political system and the social organizations and will go on being substituted by the process of power dispersion. Without an impulse towards the reconstruction of society through a propositive attitude on the part of Fox's government or by the existence of social forces that may impose themselves, the process of power feudalization will surely continue.

In this scenario, the presidency will have to increasingly deal with the more conservative forces entrenched at the local space. Tabasco and Yucatan are two examples of the manner in which local "caciques" are responding to the weakening of the central power of the presidency. Other disturbing radical examples concern the expansion of illegal forces in many regions of Mexico. Although one may suppose that the centralization of resources that exists in Mexico could impose a degree of control upon the evolution of this dispersion, the fact that the Mexican State has been abandoning many of its former functions of coordination and of its financial programs through both decentralization and reduction of State spending, means that the State has significantly reduced its capacity of leverage in this respect.

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