THE SOCIAL AND POLITICAL IMPACT OF NATURAL DISASTER: THE 1985 EARTHQUAKE AND GRASSROOTS SOCIOPOLITICAL MOBILIZATION IN MEXICO

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Our paper briefly reviews the related social and political fallout from the devastating 1985 earthquake in Mexico City. Over the course of the three years that followed the earthquake (actually two earthquakes, on September 19 and 20, of 7.8 and 7.1 magnitude), social stresses introduced by the disaster evolved a political expression that came to threaten the entire Mexican political system. Because the earthquake significantly altered the basic social and political profile of Mexico, and continues to shape political debate at present, it stands as a prime test case for studying and understanding the wide-ranging impacts of natural disasters in Latin America and the developing world.

The social and political impacts of the 1985 earthquake In Mexico City were both diverse and widespread, ranging from psychological scars to broad social and political "awakening." Mexican leaders and professionals have had to learn to understand the profound changes wrought by the earthquake on both micro and macro levels. Psychologists and

other medical professionals, for example, have had to familiarize themselves with and treat the widespread and peculiar *susto*, or shock, that followed the disaster and continues to trouble many Mexicans. Social and political observers are only just beginning to suggest ways to interpret the multiple effects of the disaster on Mexico's social and political fabric.

Certainly one the most important impacts of the 1985 earthquake was the emergence from the ruins of Mexico City of locally-oriented and locally-organized social movements which demanded attention to specific damage caused by the earthquake. New grassroots movements sprang up with surprisingly rapidity principally as a result of the government's failure to take immediate and effective action to help the victims of the disaster. Given the magnitude of the earthquake's damage and the depth of Mexico's economic crisis following the 1982 debt and oil crisis, it seems unlikely that the government could have responded any more quickly or efficiently than it did. The government garnered some support by refusing foreign aid and thus making the disaster a nationalistic rallying point, but it was unable to cap popular disatisfaction with quick and efficient resolution of complaints.

The mass mobilization of neglected social and economic sectors in the aftermath of the earthquake revealed more than anything else the depths of the 1982 economic crisis and related social stresses. The quickness of the grassroots re-

sponse and the dedication of both grassroots organizers and participants can be taken as proof that the earthquake served as a trigger and a catalyst for responses to the deep-level impact of the politics of austerity that characterized the early-1980s in Mexico. Up until 1985 the dislocation and hardship caused by economic crisis had not threatened the government's legitimacy in a serious way. After the earthquake, pent-up pressures were released that the government has not, even by 1991, been able to bring under control.

During the 1980s, social conditions deteriorated as the country felt the effects of a major economic crisis. The crisis year of 1982 was followed by at least five years of negative growth and stagnation accompanied by the highest rates of inflation ever seen in Mexico. Real wages appear to have declined by about half between 1982 and the end of the decade.

One of the sectors hardest hit by the catastrophic decline in Mexican economic fortunes was the urban poor. Among the urban poor, the swollen ranks of ambulant vendors and others "employed" in the tertiary-sector led the most precarious existence and so were the most likely to be pushed over the edge of subsistence by a natural disaster of major proportions. Even though the growth rate of central Mexico City had slowed from 5 to 2 percent annually between 1950 and 1980, the outerlying portions of the metropolis had grown from around one million in 1950 to seven millions by 1986, annual growth in the neighborhood of six percent. Fully 40

percent of all migrants to urban areas in Mexico have made Mexico City their destination.

During the 1980s, the poorest sectors of Mexico City's population saw their standard of living decrease, giving rise to the conception of the 1980s as "the lost decade." The minimum salary fell 42 percent between 1981 and 1987 while open unemployment (in the official statistics) rose from 3.4 percent to 7.4 percent of the economically active population. By 1989, investment in both education and health infrastructure had fallen as portions of GNP to half their 1980 levels. Federal expenditure in all "social" areas fell from 14.8 percent of the federal budget in 1982 to 5.4 percent in 1987.

And the urban poor would be hardest hit by the 1985 earthquake. In many cases the disaster destroyed or disrupted the most basic elements of social infrastructure--housing, water, and electricity. In the places where such infrastructure was least developed, losses were proportionally greater and more threatening. Response to such losses was immediate and sustained. What was not generally foreseen by either government officials or academic observers was the extent to which anger over immediate losses would spill over into the larger political arena.

There were three levels on which responses to the earthquake had social and political repercussions of major proportions: 1) the emergence in the aftermath of the earthquake of neighborhood groups clamoring for a timely and effective response to the damage and dislocation caused by

the disaster; 2) the subsequent emergence of highly organized, multi-sector sociopolitical movements that focused their attention on larger issues of Mexican economic, social, and political development; and, 3) a long-term and profound political impact of agitation by grassroots movements and alternative political organizations at the national level.

Groups of angered citizens whose homes had collapsed and loved-ones had died coalesced soon after the ground stopped shaking to put pressure on local authorities to restore their houses and such public services as water and electricity. Before long, these groups had also come to constitute an active mediator in disputes between landlords and tenants, forcing landlords to make repairs and heading off many attempts to demolish living quarters and sell tenement properties.

Local citizen-action groups included the following:

Neighborhood Assembly of Mexico City

Union of Rooftop and Vacant Buildings of the Federal District

Valle Gómez Popular Union

Popular Renters' Union of the Morelos-Peña Morelos Neighborhood

Central Renters' Fight Committee

Tlaltelolco Coordinating Organization for Rooftop Buildings

Neighborhood Union of Doctores Area

Popular Neighborhood Union

Central Morelos Popular Union

Seamstresses Union of September 19 [the date of the earthquake]

Renters' Union of Pensil Neighborhood

These citizen groups are interesting and important because they began as a form of access to local officials and eventually took over the role of local authorities, organizing cooperative responses and rebuilding whole city blocks. These groups thus represent a real accession to power from the grassroots of Mexican society. Because they were widespread and increasingly militant, these groups came to pose a major political threat to the Mexican government, and by implication the entire institutionalized political system forged in the 1920s and 1930s.

At times, neighborhood groups directly confronted the Mexican government as it attempted to resolve the acute crises caused by the earthquake. The most important confrontations emerged in response to the government's lack of activity in resolving basic problems of housing, water supply, and electricity. Another principal area of conflict was triggered by the perception that the government was taking advantage of the destruction caused by the earthquake to restructure urban living and commercial space; the government seemed to side implicitly with slum lords in their efforts to sell damaged tenements. The many delays, instances of inaction, and widespread evidence of incompetence on the part of

the federal government in responding to the 1985 earthquake had a major and lasting impact on national political life.

The subsequent phase in the social and political impact of the earthquake on the inhabitants of Mexico City's poorest neighborhoods was the emergence of large, well-organized movements which linked geographical and social sectors of the city. These groups began by agitating for redress of local failures and abuses on the part of the government stemming from the earthquake but gradually came to address themselves to broader issues of economic growth, social welfare, and political reform. The evolution of motivating concerns implies a linking in the popular consciousness of immediate threats on the level of basic services with underlying issues of economic development and public policy. Over time, this linkage would become increasingly explicit and overt, and at the same time, an ever greater threat to the government.

The larger, socio-political grassroots movements came to play a highly visible and rather effective direct lobbying role in national policy issues. A multitude of marches on the capital's central square were organized to demand redress of city-wide problems not only caused by the earthquakes but also existing prior to the disaster. The national media gave implicit support to these groups and their complaints by broadly and continuously covering their struggles.

The neighborhood groups and grassroots movements that appeared in the wake of the earthquake formed the basis of new, large-scale opposition to the official party (the PRI)

in Mexico City, the most serious challenge since 1940. To Mexico City's sophisticated and outspoken political community was added a broad collection of members of diverse social strata which served as a base for political organization and protest of electoral fraud. The groundswell of disaffection from the official party and the "system" in all its manifestations which followed the earthquake was most evident in the staggering loss of political legitimacy experienced by the government and its party in the presidential elections of 1988.

The government did little, perhaps could do little, to defuse this challenge from outside the system. Immediately after the earthquake, the government's preoccupation with establishing order and retaining control was apparent in its attitudes towards neighborhood groups and larger movements. The thrust of the government's response to the destruction caused in the popular settlements was to infiltrate locally-organized organizations and attempt to link them to the government planning process. The government expropriated land and housing units and built new housing primarily to restore public order and rally support for the government.

In the most important long-term impact of the earthquake, an opposition candidate for president was able in 1988 to capitalize on the disaffection of earthquake victims and the organizations that they had created to win broad support among the city's populace to challenge the official party. On election day, Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas overwhelmingly

beat the candidate of the official party, Carlos Salinas de Gortari (now president), in Mexico City and, it is still charged by opposition groups, in the nation.

The official party has attempted since 1988 to roll back the advances made by Cárdenas largely through stepped-up social outlays in Mexico City, including prominently in areas hit hard by the earthquake. In what many observers saw as direct response to the earthquake, president Salinas launched the National Solidarity project, which has funnelled large amounts of social-infrastructure support to some of the neighborhoods hardest hit by the earthquake. At the same time, Solidarity has attempted to shore up support for the PRI in areas of extreme poverty, those regions that are seen as providing the large base of support for the grassroots movements triggered by the 1985 earthquake.

Through the three phases outlined here, new grassroots movements forged ultimately by economic strain and related social malaise, but galvanized in the process of responding to the 1985 earthquake, came eventually to threaten the entire Mexican political system. The dynamic of the development of the movements indicates that the fundamental cause of the grassroots challenge to the legitimacy of the political system stemmed from social conditions imposed by the economic crisis of 1982.

In spite of the rapid development of neighborhood organization, social movements, and direct political challenge that followed the earthquake of 1985, the continuity of these

struggles must be analyzed at a distance from the initial euphoria of participants and academic observers. The individual actions and organizations that emerged with the disaster were naturally oriented towards housing issues. Because of this orientation, a certain institutionalization of these organizations was logical so that they could interact with the public organizations charged with housing and urban development.

Institutionalization of neighborhood groups and broader movements in turn demanded leaders to channel and coordinate the popular initiative. And at this point, a great number of the social organizations and movements followed a pattern of activity well known in Mexico consisting of inducting the leadership upwards, into the ranks of influence and sometimes into the institutionalized political apparatus. In some cases, leaders became separated from their social base; in some cases, the social bases dispersed. Some of the movement thus lost its initial force.

What was new about the organizations and social struggle engendered by the 1985 earthquake, and what so attracted the attention of social scientists, was that popular leaders did not on the whole follow the route towards official support, but rather collaborated in the creation of alternative political options which either won or almost won the elections of 1988. It remains to be seen whether these alternatives will prove viable over the long term. But if the movements created during the aftermath of the 1985 earthquake are still

influential in the presidential election of 1994, as most observers assume they will be, then the earthquake will have shaped a full decade of Mexico's political evolution. Understanding the social and political impacts of the earthquake is thus central to analysis of Mexican society in the 1980s and 1990s.

The Literature on the Earthquake, Housing, and Grassroots Social Movements

A good deal of literature on grassroots movements has appeared that attempts to explain the emergence of broad-based sociopolitical movements in the 1980s. The complex social and political challenges to the "system" that resulted directly from the earthquake has received less attention. It remains difficult to synthesize this varied work because it lacks coherence both in discipline and focus. We recommend five accessible works:

Connolly, Priscilla. "La política habitacional después de los sismos." *Estudios Demográficos y Urbanos,* vol. 2, no. 1, 1987.

Foweraker Joe, and Ann Craig. *Popular Movements and Political Change in Mexico.* Boulder, CO: Lynn Rienner, 1990.

Mecatl, José Luis and Marco A. Michel. *Casas a los damnificados.* México, D.F.: UNAM-IIS, 1987.

Slater, David. *New Social Movements and the State in Latin America.* Amsterdam: CEDLA, 1985.

Tirado, Ramón. *La Asamblea de Barrios.* México, D. F.: Nuestro Tiempo, 1990.

A Note on the Authors

Sergio Zermeño is one of Mexico's most distinguished sociologists and author of what is generally regarded as the definitive treatment of the 1968 student movement in Mexico (*México: Una Democracia Utópica*--originally published in 1978, now in its sixth edition). Dr. Zermeño was a visiting Fullbright scholar at the UCLA Program on Mexico for 1990; he is currently writing a book about society and politics in Mexico during the 1980s.

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