

Civil Society in Mexico

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Introduction

The concept of civil society.

In addressing the relationships between democratization and the development of civil society in Latin America, we confront two difficulties: On the one hand, theories of transition to democracy focus on political negotiations between powerholders and democratic actors, ignoring both the normative learning processes democratization entails and the emergence of social actors whose development is the only guarantee of long-term, substantive democratization.¹ On the other hand, recent theories of civil society, which assume sets of rights and democratic institutions already consolidated in Western countries, lack articulated conceptual strategies to analyze the case of nations where profound socio-cultural cleavages cut across the social fabric and determine the persistence of personal and collective dependence². Theories of transition have recently been criticized both immanently³ and from the perspective of a different conception of democracy.⁴ Theories of civil society have been less discussed in the context of Latin America, albeit recently there has been an impressive increase in the number and scope of articles and books that use this category.

¹ See Avritzer 1995

² See Olvera 1995

³ See O'Donnell 1992; and Mainwaring 1992

⁴ See Avritzer y Alberto J. Olvera 1992

This process has turned civil society into an intellectual fashion. This concept has been taken by international agencies, political leaders, parties, and the media as a “catch all” category. Consequently, the concept has become almost meaningless, as it refers to all and nothing at the same time. Such confusion asks for an urgent conceptual clarification.

The situation has been worsened by the recent generalization of analogue categories, like “third sector”⁵ and “social capital”,⁶ which allude to similar social processes. In Mexico the notion of “citizen participation” has become quite fashionable as well.⁷ We cannot possibly discuss such concepts here.⁸ However, at least the notion of civil society deserves more attention.

There are two main concepts of civil society dominating the literature on the issue. One is of liberal nature, whose origins go back to the Scottish philosophers who invented the concept.⁹ Maybe the main defender of this version in the Spanish speaking world is Victor Perez Diaz.¹⁰ His definition is very broad, and encompasses the market, the rule of law, a dense network of associations, the public space and a tolerant and pluralistic political culture. Only the state stays out of the concept of civil society. By doing this, Perez Diaz cannot differentiate out the particular type of social action that characterizes the civil society. Action in the market is of strategic nature: the search for profits. The rules of the market are

⁵See Salomon and Anheir 1995

⁶ The classic reference is Putnam 1993

⁷For a critical analysis of this concept, see Rivera 1998

⁸For a critique of the application of the concepts of civil society and social capital in the international development agencies see Rabotnifoff 1999. For a critique see Olvera 1998

⁹ See Seligman 1992; Taylor 1991

¹⁰ See Pérez Díaz 1993, 1997

impersonal and are not subjected to critique. Action in the public sphere and in the associations is communicative in nature, open to critique and no strategic in principle. One thing is to accept the market as a precondition of civil society (Hegel) and another to consider it its main institution. Liberals in general stands for the market as the backbone of civil society. To the merit of Perez Diaz, he has insisted more on the “civilizatory” function of civil society, this is, its pluralistic and tolerant culture-generating capacity. In this sense, civil society becomes a historical product of modernity, a set of believes and moral principles that remain the cultural substratum of collective life in modern times. This notion is shared by Alexander,¹¹ who think that the very foundation of civil society is the structure of values and believes that orient social action, especially those that promote civil associationism, tolerance, and respect for the law. Evoking Parsons, Alexander defines civil society as “a sphere of universal social solidarity” (1994:18), forgetting that civil society is a field of moral, cultural and material conflict. What differentiates civil society out from the political and economic systems is that in principle those conflicts are discussed in the public sphere and tolerated as a part of public life.

The other dominant concept is one that reduces civil society to the sphere of civil associationism. In Mexico this is a very powerful interpretation,¹² as NGOs and some social movements consider themselves to be “the” civil society. This meaning has been reinforced by some international NGO networks, like CIVICUS¹³, and mainly by the international development agencies.¹⁴ The problem

¹¹ See Alexander 1993, 1994.

¹² See the journal *Sociedad Civil*, especially Vol. 1, Num. 1, intro. See too Canto 1998.

¹³ See De Oliveira and Tandon 1994

¹⁴ See the excellent critical analysis of Rabotnikoff 1999

with this version is that it limits civil society to NGOs, leaving aside the fact that civil society is a complex set of social actors, on the one side, and a set of institutions, on the other. Moreover, this is a highly ideological operation, because the field of the social is reduced to a very specific practice that cannot possibly explain the vast world of conflict and plurality that defines social reality.

A. Arato and J. Cohen offer a broader definition, which is heavily influenced by Habermas and his theory of communicative action. They define civil society as “the institutional framework of a modern lifeworld stabilized by fundamental rights, which will include within their scope the spheres of the public and the private (from a lifeworld point of view)”.¹⁵ The “public” encompasses the public sphere, which is the actual terrain of normative learning process. The public sphere refers to a set of arenas and sites where free (from systemic constraints) communicative interaction can be approximated in social praxis. The private is the terrain of familial and interpersonal relations.¹⁶

This institutional definition of civil society follows Habermas’s theoretical-historical claim of the primacy of lifeworld over system.¹⁷ It establishes civil society’s sociological terrain and agents, and allows for an interpretation of their democratizing potential that gets past the “institutional deficit” encumbering many new social movement theories.¹⁸ However, it also shares with Habermas’s theory a historically specific character. Only in the West have fundamental rights been

¹⁵ See Cohen and Arato 1992 : 492

¹⁶ See Habermas 1989. See also Calhoun 1992 and *Metapolítica* Vol. 3, Num. 9, Dossier.

¹⁷ See Habermas 1984/1987. For a restatement of the theory, and its connection to the law and civil society, see Habermas 1998.

¹⁸ See Cohen 1985. Cohen’s *dictum* alludes to the fact that theories of social movements do not include the legal-institutional dimension in their analysis. It seems that institutions do not matter in the origin, development and consequences of social movements. Habermas’s theory allows the correction of this bias.

effectively institutionalized and eventually extended in successive waves of juridification to the fields of political, social, and economic freedoms and entitlements. In the rest of the world, Western institutions were often formally adopted but in fact ignored or merely functionally utilized as a new instrument of domination.

Therefore, a second dimension of the concept of civil society may be better suited to countries where rights are insufficiently institutionalized. Arato and Cohen consider social movements to be the active, constructive part of modern civil societies, insofar as they push forward new values, identities, and cultural paradigms.¹⁹ In the modern West, social movements profit from established rights while departing from normalized institutions to introduce new “codes” that challenge the dominant self-interpretations of society.²⁰

Yet a corrective is needed to the Western understanding of civil society. Elsewhere, social movements follow of two main trends: First, class- or group-based social movements (working class, peasant, urban dweller movements). In the developed world, these movements spearheaded the universal extension of civil and political rights and the institutionalization and universalization of social rights. The virtual absence (or segmentation, partiality, or conditioning) of these rights in the “Third World” makes class-based social movements important agents of democratization.²¹ In historical-comparative terms, these movements have been culturally less influential, politically less autonomous, and socially less

¹⁹ See Cohen and Arato 1992.

²⁰ See Alberto Melucci 1989. Also see Melucci 1994 and Melucci, 1996.

²¹For an analogue argument, see Rueschemeyer, Stephens and Stephens 1992. This is a historically valid argument. However, each country can have a very different historical pattern and chances of actual materialization of this trend. On the issue, see the final section of this paper.

representative in the “Third World” countries than in the “West”. This very weakness partially explains the lack of universal rights and elementary social justice there. The development, political autonomization and empowerment of class-based movements remain an unfinished project without which the stabilization of rights will not be achieved, even under democratic governments²².

The second type of social movements is the socio-cultural or “new” ones. But outside the West, such movements operate without the rule of law, democracy, and social justice. Without these preconditions, their aspirations for new universal values, lifestyles, and concepts of progress carry little social, political, and cultural weight. The politics of influence - Western social movements’ privileged mechanism - requires a public sphere within which to publicize new societal claims; modern parties permeable to new demands; social spaces and fields where new lifestyles can be experimented with; and a pluralistic culture open to the new and able to incorporate what is becoming socially and morally acceptable.²³ These factors only barely exist in Latin America, or they are operative only for small elites, usually dissociated from the majority population. For this reason, most cultural movements in Latin America direct their attention to the basics: rights, justice, and democracy.

Civil society as a movement has then two main forms: (a) “popular civil society,” which comprises class social movements;²⁴ and (b) a set of socio-cultural movements that combine “postmaterialist” values with a concern with the

22 There is a difference between this argument and the one most class theories entail. Here we are speaking of an historical need. Class associations can exert pressure over the political system to actualize the rule of law. No substantive mission is ascribed here to the working class, except the social responsibility of acting as a social movement to bring about actual and general rights.

23 See Cohen and Arato 1992.

undelivered promises of modernity. In Latin America, these not only address the same problems (albeit for different reasons, and with different methods), but also face the same instability caused by the absence of rights and democratic institutions. Thus the greatest challenge for civil society as a movement is its institutionalization, that is, the operationalization and universalization of rights.

Along this process the cultural dimension of civil society, highlighted by Perez Diaz and Alexander, could be constructed. The respect for the law and for the others is certainly a symbolic component of the contemporary struggles for democracy.

If anything, the Latin American experience shows that precisely where people are extremely unequal, old political practices and traditions based on links of personal or collective dependence (clientelism, corporatism, patrimonialism) can coexist with formally democratic regimes. And because structural inequality implies enormous problems of social integration, democracy cannot stabilize itself, despite the institutional engineering of elites. All these factors, linked by communication problems arising from diffuse local cultures and forms of knowledge, must be analyzed to assess the potentials and problems of the institutionalization of civil society.²⁵

In Latin America, political traditions and institutions such as clientelism, corporatism and patrimonialism will persist side by side with modern forms of

²⁴ See Lynch 1991. See also Oxford 1995

²⁵ See Lomnitz 1992, for a creative and useful conceptualization of "local" cultures and various forms of cultural institutionalization in regional settings.

political participation and representation. The risks of political instrumentalization²⁶ of social action are therefore enormous, insofar as political actors have a high degree of structural autonomy from society. Therefore, the first dilemma of substantive democratization is how to slow social polarization and the marginalization of an increasing share of the population.

CIVIL SOCIETY IN MEXICO

I.- The Historical Origins of the Mexican Authoritarian Regime and its Effects on the National Political Culture

The enormous difficulties confronting the rise of democracy and civil society in contemporary Mexico can only be understood by tracing liberalism's defeat in Mexican political culture and institutions back to their origins.²⁷ Oddly enough, the liberal legacy was rejected in practice at the same time that its formal democratic principles were institutionalized at the constitutional level.²⁸ The contradiction between the simultaneous formal legalization of democracy and the *de facto* institution of authoritarian rule defines the very essence of politics in Mexico.

The regime established in the aftermath of the Revolution of 1917 initiated two major historical projects: an antiliberal program of social and political inclusion, making the state itself the nexus of social integration; and an antiliberal program of national development through which the state historically assumed the steering

²⁶ I mean by "instrumentalization" the strategic use of social action by political parties. Instead of receiving actual support, social movements are frequently colonized by political activists whose main concern is to channel protest towards electoral, insurreccional or confrontational aims.

³³ See Reyes Heróles 1966. See also Guerra 1989.

³⁴ Indeed, after Independence, Mexico followed the very common Third World practice of institutional imitation. The Constitutions of 1824 and 1857 were remarkably liberal, democratic, federal and republican manifestos whose relationship with actual political practice was null. On the "imaginary" character of Mexican citizens in 19th Century Mexico, see Escalante 1992. On the contradiction between liberalism and patrimonial rulership, see Guerra 1989 and Knight 1986. See as well two recent books: Sabato 1999 and Guerra 1998.

Middlebrook 1995; Maxfield 1990.

(e) The state's monopoly of the public sphere and installment of official ideology in the educational system, in cultural production, and in forms of national identity-creation.

The law became above all a way to guarantee the sovereignty of the state over social and economic actors, whether national or foreign. The market was understood not as an autonomous sphere with independent forms of coordination, but as a way to pursue modernization. Rights were applied in a segmental and selective fashion, without their being able to constitute a form defense or demarcation of society.

The strategic assimilation of traditional forms of mediation between state and society (such as clientelism and patrimonialism) reinforced the institutions and conventions that isolated politics from modern forms of popular participation. The institutional and ideological framework thus created severely limited the scope of "legitimate and valid" social action, which was much more restricted than what the rights clauses established in the letter of the law. Limited spaces of action, strict demarcation of valid action, and monopolization of public life hindered the stabilization of modern lifeworld institutions throughout the rise and consolidation of the developmental-authoritarian state.

Social actors resisted and adapted to the institutions of the Revolutionary regime. Differently from the socialist regimes, the Mexican one was able along half a century of being flexible enough as to open multiple spaces of participation and negotiation of conflicts. Combining wisely politics of repression, cooptation and integration of social movements, the regime avoided a generalized crisis of

37 See Olvera 1995.

legitimation until the late eighties. The successful formula of periodic renovation of the political elite helped to avoid open internal conflicts. The opposition had enough room to survive, but not to prosper. Only the Catholic Church continued its historical opposition to the regime's monopoly of the public and of the organization of society without success.³²

II.- Emergence and Collapse of a Popular Civil Society and the Turn Toward Electoral Politics, 1982 - 1988

The vast social change brought about by country's economic development gradually undermined the regime's foundations.³³ The regime's crisis, with origins reaching back to 1968, combined two main factors: (a) The exhaustion of the economic model based on particularist arrangements, indiscriminate protectionism, and lack of societal control over state investments; that is, the end of the developmental capacity of the "fusion" between the state and economy; (b) the emergence of new social actors who could not be coopted through traditional

³² Historically, the idea of urban cultural groups working outside the state framework was launched by the only actor whose institutionality and resources could allow the existence of a small but autonomous sphere of action: the Catholic Church. By the mid-sixties, the Church's Mexican Social Secretariat was the driving force behind the formation of several specialized associations: *Promoción del Desarrollo Popular* (Popular Development Promotion); *Centro Operacional de Vivienda y Poblamiento* (Population and Housing Operational Center); *Fundación para el Desarrollo Rural* (Rural Development Foundation). These associations were meant to address specific development problems at the micro level with the financial help of the Church. The *Unión Social de Empresarios Mexicanos* (Social Union of Mexican Entrepreneurs) and the *Frente Auténtico del Trabajo* (Authentic Labor Front) were class associations whose function would be to introduce social-Catholic values in labor-entrepreneurs relations (Reygadas 1995; Canto 1995). These associations were meant to enhance the Catholic Church's influence in society. However, their actual role was in fact limited by the state's omnipresence. Yet all these associations are still working or provided the basis of new ones.

³⁹ During the period 1940-1980, the Mexican economy grew at a rate of 6.8% a year. Population increased constantly at a median annual rate of 3%, from 16 million in 1940 to 35 million in 1960, when, for the first time, urban and rural population reached an equilibrium (50% each). In 1980, there were 67 million inhabitants, 66% urban, and 82 million in 1990, with almost 80% living in the cities. The Indian population diminished from 20% to 5% during the same time span. Economic development meant rapid industrialization and urbanization, concentrated above all in Mexico City, and in several other large and medium-sized cities. The society's class composition changed as well. Peasants diminished from 75% of the work force (in 1940) to 27% (in 1980) the working class increased from 18% of the work force to 25% during that same period,

means; that is, the impossibility of maintaining the “fusion” between state and society. The prolonged crisis of the Mexican regime mainly rose from ongoing processes of differentiation of the economy, state, and society, ultimately leading to a legitimation crisis.³⁴

The process of emergence of a sense of societal autonomy preceded the economic crisis. The regime’s incapacity to allow the existence of autonomous actors and instances of political plurality alienated broad sections of the increasingly important urban middle classes. The student movement of 1968 developed as its consequence, radicalizing a generation of young professionals. The formation of relatively independent workers unions and peasant organizations in the early seventies was the result of the new availability of radical activists and of President Echeverría’s attempts of weakening old corporations in order them to accept a relative liberalization of politics.

President Luis Echeverría’s administration (1970-1976) marked the beginning of a new wave of social movements around the country and the emergence of a new tradition of autonomous association. Worker, urban-dweller, peasant, student and middle-class movements sprouted up around the country; entrepreneurs began to create autonomous associations;³⁵ and an overall process of liberalization permitted relative freedoms of association, expression and the press. Only electoral politics remained untouched (except for minor cosmetic

which meant the creation of almost 3 million new jobs. The rest have been incorporated to the service sector, commerce, and the informal urban economy.

40 See Olvera 1995.

41 For workers movements, see Middlebrook, 1995, Ch. 6; and Bizberg, 1990; for peasant movements see Olvera, 1997; for urban dwellers movements see Núñez, 1990, and Farrera, 1994. For entrepreneurs associations see Luna, 1992.

changes). It was until 1977, in the beginning of President López Portillo's term, that the first significant political reform in the regime's history was initiated (the legal recognition of the Communist Party and the extension of the system of proportional representation). The simultaneity of a politics of relative liberalization in the popular field and of electoral closure demonstrates that President Echeverría was searching for a modernization of corporatism and not for a true democratization of politics.

A form of development of civil society, meaning the emergence of class-associative movements differentiating themselves from state and market institutions at a national scale, can be found in this period. However, two factors limited their transformative potential and determined the weakness of this version of civil society:

- a) Structural changes did not lead to the creation of new forms of collective action. The revolutionary origin of the regime, its inclusive character and its systemic flexibility to negotiate with, absorb or repress social movements led to an accepted tradition of mass mobilization and radical language in the public sphere.
- b) The leftist, professional political leadership of most popular social movements led to their frequent instrumentalization, radicalization, and absorption into the regime's ideology of the supremacy of substantive principles of justice. The left could only criticize the regime for its shortcomings, but not for its authoritarian essence. It was a counterfactual critique, not the positing of a new political principle.

In this period a different form of civil society began appeared along popular social movements. During the seventies the spread of liberation theology helped to

generalize the formation of Christian base communities in Mexico. However, they were not as successful as their Brazilian counterparts for several reasons. Internally, they received minimal support from the hierarchy. In terms of the rationality of their action, they concentrated on "consciousness raising": the poor should discover their own situation of oppression and find a path to liberation.³⁶ Apart from this being an overly abstract discourse, there were few ways to anchor the search for liberation in actual social practice. However, CBCs were people's greatest school in Mexico in many regions: a place of discussion, oftentimes the only public space available for peasants and urban dwellers. A generation of potential social leaders was formed in the CBCs.

The economic crisis of 1982 took all social actors by surprise.³⁷ Having enjoyed five years of accelerated economic growth, and the most impressive expansion of state intervention in the economy, Mexico awoke from the oil boom dream: the country had no foreign-exchange reserves; it was unable to pay off its external debt; and inflation grew exponentially. A structural economic crisis defined the entire decade.³⁸

The extended economic crisis altered the objective conditions affecting the developing social movements. Now opportunities for clientelistic bargaining in

³⁶ See on the overall experience of the Latin American church in this time, Casanova, 1994. For Mexico: Blancarte (coord), 1995; Muro, 1994.

⁴³ The GNP fell by 4.5% in 1983 and 1986, and showed an average zero growth between 1983 and 1988. Real wages decreased an average of 35%. Public investment in education and health suffered a 45% decrease in real terms. The share of labor in the total national income plummeted from 46% to 30%. The collapse of living standards had no precedent in Mexican history since the Revolution of 1910. See Sylvia Maxfield, 1990

⁴⁴ Indeed, it was not a short-term crisis what was at stake. It was the end of an economic model. Along the eighties, the government prepared the way for the neo-liberal turn in economic policy.

unions and urban associations diminished along with the state's capacity to coopt popular movements as resources grew scarce. The conflict-ridden nationalization of the bank system in 1982 alienated some sectors of the bourgeoisie, and the devastating effects of frequent devaluations in Northern Mexico (where daily life was linked to the value of the dollar) led to the mobilization of the middle classes and of small and medium entrepreneurs alike.

Independent unions were not prepared to face the terrible economic crisis of the mid-eighties. When firms began to lay-off workers and real wages fell freely, virtually all the independent industrial unions simultaneously collapsed, defenseless to the state's onslaught amid a momentary loss of internal credibility and legitimacy.³⁹

Meanwhile, rural civil society development was plagued with at least three kinds of trouble. First, the social movements were growing atomistically, dispersed in time and space and therefore without local or regional webs of political support, means to influence public opinion, or enough power to gain advanced local relevance over traditional actors. Second, their main arena of development, the creation of "self-managed" peasant economic organizations, was highly unstable, depending as it did on government economic support and being poorly positioned in the market. Their other locus of development, the consumer associations organized around the state system of good distribution also depended on public resources and was severely restricted in its activities.⁴⁰ Third, the economic character of these associations gave them a trade union profile and forced them to

45 See Enrique de la Garza 1994.

46 See Gordillo 1988.

develop technical, administrative and political capacities rare among the peasants. Technicians, professional activists, members of NGOs, and peasants with professional backgrounds took over the organizations and completely dominated daily operations.⁴¹

Urban popular movements consolidated organizationally and expanded their sphere of action. All leftist groups were able to create an urban clientele as immigration to the cities continued and the problem of urban land ownership became more urgent. The oldest groups opened a second front of action following the earthquake in Mexico City in 1985: “urban reorganization.” At the same time, the upper middle-classes initiated some “self-management” experiments in high income neighborhoods to ensure security services and acceptable state maintenance of urban facilities. The “new” social movements (human rights, environmental, and feminist movements) had limited influence, being only in an initial phase of development.

Entrepreneurs and conservative middle-class groups rebelled in their own way. Devaluation, inflation and state intervention combined to make life unbearable in the mid-eighties. So they turned to electoral politics as a way out of what they perceived as state abuse and impotence. The already existing links between the *Partido Accion Nacional* (PAN) and some conservative middle-class groups made participating in the PAN appear as an acceptable alternative.

The public justification of this political activism was the search for the rule of law. Therefore, for the first time since the *Cardenista* period, the rupture between

⁴¹ Most of these associations were seen by their rank- and-file members as a kind of state agency in terms of their functions and of the virtual impossibility to control the activities of their leaders-administrators. See A.

legality and legitimacy became the axis of public political action, and democracy the main aspiration, at least for active citizens in the north. In 1983, the government allowed for more or less free local elections in Chihuahua as a kind of experiment. The PAN won all the urban municipal governments. These results discouraged further experimentation, and the government retrenched its normal electoral fraud. This response radicalized sectors of middle-classes, and the PAN became an authentic democratic opposition, attracting more and more followers.⁴² Participation in the PAN became the way to do politics for the conservative middle-classes, and the way to establish relationships with the people. Workers and peasants also voted for the PAN, given the dearth of credible alternatives on left. In the rest of the country, the very reality of structural fraud seemed a convincing reason to avoid electoral participation, and therefore most popular social movements maintained their antipolitical politics.

A new wave of urban-cultural-led associationism occurred in the eighties.⁴³ From 1984 on human rights groups began to appear, first as a response to the violation of Central American immigrants' human rights, and then as a reaction to the violation of human rights in Mexico. Most of them were influenced or promoted by specific Catholic religious orders, but not by the hierarchy.⁴⁴ More than 100 human

Olvera and C. Millán (1994: 53-69).

⁴⁸ See Loeza 1989.

⁴⁹ The "modern movement of NGOs appeared in the eighties" (Aguayo and Quezada, 1995: 2).

⁴⁴ The emergence of these movements implied in fact a normative learning: the concept of human rights was adopted to legitimize the struggle for the rights of non-citizens. Therefore, there was a need to use international legislation and U.N. agreements.

rights-related NGOs appeared in the eighties.⁴⁵ Professionally staffed NGOs oriented to specific development services were a phenomenon of the eighties as well.⁴⁶

The contradiction between the conservative character of the Catholic hierarchy in Mexico and the influence religious orders like the Jesuit had in the formation of NGOs has to do with the very political plurality that emerged in the Catholic church after the Second Vatican Council.⁴⁷ Even within the hierarchy, the Social Secretariat acted with relative autonomy in certain periods. The good times of the Ecclesiastic Base Communities (1970-78) helped to create a radical tradition amongst the progressive ranks of the laypersons. From here comes one of the cultural tradition that helped to create independent civil organizations.

III.- Neoliberalism, Crisis of Legitimation, and the Emergence of a Modern Civil Society

In the period 1988-1994, three fundamental changes took place in Mexico. First, at the systemic level, the turn towards neoliberalism led to profound changes in the economy and to several constitutional revisions that legalized the state's retreat from its activist role in the economy and reproduction of society. These phenomena deepened both the processes of differentiation of the state, economy, and society, and the ongoing legitimation crisis. Second, for the first time since the Revolution of 1917, a party system consolidated and democracy appeared as a

⁴⁵ See Aguayo and Parra 1995. Most of them were quite small groups whose actual practice varied widely.

⁴⁶ Analysis, Decentralization and Management (ANADEGES) (1986) was the first network of the developmental NGOs staffed by professionals. All of them worked in very specific and local projects, usually with control groups. This network had 20+ members. Another kind of network was *Promoción de Servicios de Salud y Educación Popular* (PRODUSSEP) (Promotion of Health and Educational Services) (1986), a church-related NGO network oriented toward basic services. All the groups participating in both networks worked in local settings and even with small groups within communities.

⁴⁷ See Casanova 1995.

potential means for a regime change. Third, several civic-cultural movements spread across the country, creating a civil society centered on the struggle for political rights, democracy, and the rule of law. The combination of these factors created a real opening for a democratic transition and for the stabilization of a modern civil society. However, even at this stage, political society was unable to anchor its action in civil society, leading to a weak and unstable party system.

In Mexico, neoliberalism meant opening the doors to three great transformations: the integration of the Mexican economy into the world market (which implied complementary integration into the United States' economy as a subordinate partner);⁴⁸ the privatization of public enterprises and an overall state withdrawal from the economy; and an amendment to the Constitution purging it of its antiliberal substance, thus lifting limitations on the mobility of capital.⁴⁹ All three were completed during President Carlos Salinas's administration, between 1989 and 1994, and built on the far-reaching economic adjustments already carried through between 1983-1988.

The symbolic and legal effect both of the privatization of public enterprises and ejido lands and the declared end of the agrarian reform was enormous. These measures meant that the state relinquished both its pact with the peasants and its

53 This was what the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) meant: constitutionally-backed legal guarantees that in the long term there would remain unchanged, clear rules for capital, regardless of any possible political shifts. NAFTA represented the breakdown of the traditional Mexican concept of sovereignty. Indeed, in Mexico, national sovereignty was always understood as autonomy vis-à-vis the United States.

54 Between 1988 and 1994, 54 constitutional amendments and 225 amendments to secondary or regulatory laws were enacted. The amendments to Article 27 allowed privatization of some of the main public enterprises and part of the banking system. Some of these changes led to the end of agrarian reform and to the beginning of the privatization of the ejido lands (January 1993). In practice, these amendments amounted to a virtual process of constitution-making, insofar as the main provisions of the constitution, those that defined the anti-liberal character of the Mexican regime, were lifted.

mission to control and steer the market. These two principles had formed the foundation of the revolutionary project and its antiliberal tenor. Abandoning them implied recognizing the dissolution of the regime's ideological foundations and endorsing a classical version of liberalism.

The profundity and pace of the neoliberal economic changes were, however, not matched by political changes of comparable liberal content. On the contrary, even if liberalization was pursued in the political public sphere, any actual democratization was deliberately postponed so as to forestall its inevitable attendants: political limitations of the sovereign state, and citizen oversight of the economic transformation.

From 1989 to 1993, most states and municipalities became arenas of post-electoral struggles. The federal government preserved the ability to recognize (or not) opposition victories, and campaigns were openly unequal, with the official party controlling all resources. Only after complex and prolonged negotiations were some opposition victories accepted. Thus the PAN obtained for the first time in history three governorships and dozens of mayoralties, whereas the left-wing party *Partido de la Revolución Democrática* (PRD) had to stage enormous popular mobilizations to defend its victories in municipal elections.

President Salinas saw in the PRD the main enemy of modernization. In mid 1989, the PRD was created through a strategic alliance between communists, radical nationalists, old populists, social democrats, and social movement activists, all under the charismatic leadership of Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, son of one of the creators of the modern Mexican state, President Lázaro Cárdenas. Cárdenas, who

was short of defeating the PRI in the presidential elections of 1988, seemed to offer a vehicle to recover old political identities deconstructed by the neoliberal policies. The PRD strategically promoted the quick collapse of the regime, but its politics of confrontation failed to attract the urban electorate. The PRD's plea to recover the necessary nexus between morality (understood as fidelity to the "project of the Revolution") and legitimacy proved unattractive to the people.

Contrarily, the PAN acted pragmatically and openly sought alliance with President Salinas. The PAN backed all the constitutional reforms promoted by Salinas - insofar as they had originally been proposed by the PAN itself. This programmatic alliance was strategically undertaken with a long-term transition in view, the axis of which was control of state and local governments. This alliance produced some positive results, but it also compromised the PAN's critique of the contradiction between legality and legitimacy.

The enormous weight of political traditions and entrenched interests within the regime created a great obstacle to all reforms carried out from above. Consequently, Salinas endeavored to fashion a parallel political apparatus through a new social-clientelistic program called Solidarity (*Programa Nacional de Solidaridad*). Its stated aim was to involve the poor in designing and controlling public works through organized local committees. The intention was to open a direct channel of negotiation between the state and established social organizations, or to offer favorable conditions to create them where they did not exist.

The regime decided to refurbish its substantive legitimacy by modernizing clientelism. The government's strategy presupposed the gulf separating the

emerging civil society from the remaining traditional elements. The latter were prominent enough to guarantee electoral majority to the party that secured its loyalty. The “modern” PRI was thus guaranteeing dependable electoral support by exploiting the marginalized, traditional part of society. In fact, the actual practice of Solidarity shows the state bureaucracy at all levels using the old clientelistic methods attaching state “favor” directly to official party and personal or group loyalty.⁵⁰ The urgent need to win local elections at whatever cost reinforced this natural tendency, which also exposed the profound roots of paternalistic and clientelistic practices in the national political culture.

Thus was the old “fusion” between state, economy and society modernized at a new level of differentiation, but its consequence was a crisis of legitimacy rooted at two levels: morality, due to the crumbling of the foundational myth of the search for social justice; and legality, due to the unacceptability of electoral fraud in normal politics.

With civil and political society lacking modern forms of coordination, the implementation of an authentic party system could not realize its positive potential. Political actors’ relationship to civil society was developed through projects of political instrumentalization. The state attempted to revive populism by establishing a direct relationship between state welfare agencies and organized local groups. But, unable to supply guarantees for these groups’ institutionalization and permanence, this project failed. For the political left, meanwhile, the persistence of a corporatist tradition encouraged the forging of clientelistic links between the PRD

⁵⁵ See Middlebrook, K. et al. 1994.

and the movements. Such continuity with the clientelist past, however, was rejected by most new social movements, which strove for greater autonomy from political society. On the political right, civil society was viewed with suspicion, considered an unpredictable mass of movements susceptible to political utilization and antithetical to the modern citizen the PAN wanted to address.

All the same, the two main opposition parties were able to begin to consolidate themselves as viable alternatives to a regime unable to maintain its monopoly on politics and adapt itself to an increasingly active, though irregular, citizen participation. This fact encouraged both the opposition parties and most political analysts to view the transition to democracy as an autonomous process with no intrinsic connections to other societal elements. Taking theories of transition to democracy at face value, politicians and intellectuals alike came to regard democracy as an achievement of elite bargaining with no concern for the empowerment of civil society or for the resolution of the problems of representation weak political parties still faced.

As a reaction, it was in this period that a different civil society emerged in the form of NGO's networks and pro-democratic social movements. The increasing number of NGOs in all areas of action, and the perceived threat from the government in the early nineties,⁵¹ led most NGOs to participate in a process of collective organization in networks, both thematic and by political affinity.

Three main national NGOs networks were created in this period:

⁵¹ For the first time the government began to tax NGO's income, even donations given by international foundations, in 1990.

Network	Date of formation	Affiliates	Objectives
CEMEFI	1988	200	To get resources for NGOs Promotion of civil society Professionalization
FAM	1992	250	Professionalization of NGOs Intervention in public policies Public promotion of NGOs
Convergencia ⁵²	1990	140	Defense against taxation Intervention in public policies Electoral observation.

Another network of the time was the Mexican Action Network on Free Trade (1991) (RMALC), which was the first joint institution of NGOs, popular social movements and free citizens, having around 80 collective members.⁵³ Given that NAFTA implied the overhaul of economic policy and a long-term commitment to a set of rules in matters of trade, investment and labor and environmental regulations, the

⁵² The full names of these networks are: *Centro Mexicano de Filantropía* (CEMEFI); *Foro de Apoyo Mutuo* (FAM); *Convergencia de Organizaciones Civiles por la Democracia* . The FAM has recently decided to dismantle itself due to administrative irregularities and a loss of confidence in one of its main officials.

⁵³ See Chalmers et al. 1995.

stakes were high for all actors involved. For the first time, development NGOs, some unions, some small business associations, specialized intellectuals and even journalists were forced to systematize their proposals in the terrain of social policies. They proposed to include a "social agenda" in NAFTA, in order to commit the three North American governments to the leveling of welfare conditions and labor and environmental policies in the long-term.⁵⁴

Pro-democratic movements emerged in this period as well. Citizens groups formed by some leading political and cultural personalities were the first civic response to the 1988 fraud⁵⁵. At the same time, human rights groups were undergoing a learning process in which most of them concluded that the absence of the rule of law was due to authoritarianism, the impossibility of making the government accountable for its acts⁵⁶. As a logical consequence, the notion of human rights was extended to the area of political rights.

The provisional and tentative character of the neoliberal solution to the problems of legitimation and of reproduction of the regime came to the fore suddenly in 1994 and 1995, when both the economic and the political foundations of the neoliberal project seemed to collapse.

IV.- Paradoxical times: growth and uncertainty in civil society in the government of President Zedillo (1994-2000).

⁵⁴ Interview with Manuel García Urrutia, Jalapa, Ver., 4/20/93, activist of the *Frente Auténtico del Trabajo* and founding member of the RMALC.

⁵⁵ The *Asociación Democrática por el Sufragio Efectivo* (ADESE) (Democratic Association for Effective Suffrage) was created in late 1988 and the *Consejo para la Democracia* (Council for Democracy) in 1990. Both were small groups of former middle-range politicians.

⁵⁶ See Acosta 1994. Therefore, the only way to ensure the generalization of basic individual rights was the struggle for a democratic regime. Also see Reygadas 1995; Acosta 1994; Aguayo and Parra 1995.

From political and economic crisis to relative recovery.

In 1994 the illusions created by President Salinas came to an end. Three factors compromised his projects: the Indian insurrection in Chiapas⁵⁷, the internal divisions in his regime⁵⁸ and the economic breakdown of late 1994.⁵⁹ The result of this process was the ultimate delegitimation of Salinas himself and his group and the extreme weakness of President Zedillo in the outset of his government. At the same time, the regime's efforts of internal transformation were stopped, causing a political stalemate along which Zedillo's capacity of controlling the PRI increasingly eroded. During 1995 and 1996 the regime had no stable and coherent political strategy. There was a sensation of breakdown the opposition was not able to profit from. No global political negotiations among political actors were carried out. The only effort in that sense was aborted in February 1995.⁶⁰ The political process was left to the rules of the political market (elections) and to the always specific and chaotic bargaining in the Chamber of Deputies.

After a period of uncertainty, President Zedillo achieved the political stabilization of the government by building a new coalition that recognized the

⁵⁷ See in this book the chapter by Hernández.

⁵⁸ The political weakness of Zedillo, who was unable to build an inclusive internal coalition in the outset of his administration, prompted the resignation of three main cabinet members within the first five months of his government, as well as an open confrontation with former president Salinas.

⁵⁹ The unexpected and sudden devaluation of the Mexican currency on December 20, 1994 occurred only three weeks after Zedillo had taken oath. This event, for which the government was totally unprepared, was followed by an almost unbelievable chain of blunders in economic policy, all of which culminated in the emergency financial intervention of the IMF and the United States government. Sovereignty in economic policy-making was thus lost. However, the government managed to limit the visible effects of the crisis to the year 1995, getting from 1996 on modest increases in economic growth. At the same time, the rate of inflation diminished and the rapid growth of the external sector helped to avoid a prolonged recession.

⁶⁰ In early February 1995 President Zedillo opened a sort of "Round Table" with the opposition parties whose aim was to pact a "state policy" to overcome the economic crisis and further the political reform. However, the unexpected offensive against the *zapatistas* led to the collapse of the negotiations.

power of the regional leaders and of the governors. The unstable character of this coalition was demonstrated by the fact that the PRI was unable, left to their own internal process, to avoid internal divisions in at least four states (Zacatecas 1998, Tlaxcala 1998, Baja California 1998, Nayarit 1999), all of which were afterwards won by the PRD, which supported the rebel PRI local leaders.

In the first opportunity, Mexican citizens demonstrated in the polls that they were deeply affected by the economic crisis of 1995-96⁶¹ and they wanted a political change. Indeed, in the July 1997 elections the opposition parties won for the first time the majority in the Chamber of Deputies. The government tried not to recognize the fact that the PRI had lost the majority in the Chamber of Deputies, causing a virtual *coup d'état* that was avoided in the last minute. Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, the moral leader of the party of the left, the PRD, became the first elected major of Mexico City. The right-wing party, the PAN, won the elections for governor in three more states. The new political situation created new popular hopes of a rapid end of the authoritarian regime. Public attention was concentrated in the new struggles in parliament and in the performance of the new government of Mexico City.

However, since then four processes helped the government to avoid a terminal political crisis. First, the opposition parties were unable to create a stable

⁶¹ Agriculture felt in a deep recession, leading to a massive process of emigration of peasant population to the cities and especially to the United States (*Diario AZ, Jalapa*, February 10th and 11th, 2000: 1). The crisis of peasant production has affected most branches. Even worse, the economic crisis coincided with the reduction of public investment in the sector and the government's complete retirement of its past regulatory role in basic products. Real wages are today 20% to 30% lower than in 1994 (*El Financiero*, August 31st, 1998:17; *Reforma*, November 3rd, 1999, Financial Section). Employment in the formal sector just recently has reached the level it used to have in 1994. As a result, income distribution is today more unequal than ever in the recent history of the country (*La Jornada*, April 30th, 1999:26).

alliance in the Chamber of Deputies. Instead of creating a political front, the PAN and the PRD followed different strategies, each one trying to benefit from what was seen as the ultimate act of delegitimation of the regime: the rescue of the banks⁶². The PRD simply opposed any policy towards the banks and attempted to gain popular support by denouncing a “massive fraud to the nation”.⁶³ The move proved to be a miscalculation. The PAN assumed the risk of defining with the government a policy that was supposed to force the government to pay a political cost for the rescue and to turn the PAN into a responsible and capable governing party. The PAN ended up endorsing the policy the government had already chosen. Even worst, the PAN was unable to obtain any political advantage from such an enormous concession. The end result was a new lack of visibility of the bank problem and the regime’s political triumph in a decisive matter.

Second, the PRD governed Mexico City in such an unimaginative manner that the citizens got disenchanted with the leftist political alternative. This process was worsened by the visibility of the PRD’s internal divisions, especially during the process of election of its President in early 1999. Moreover, the PAN and the PRI were unable to pact an electoral alliance for the 2000 federal elections, further delegitimizing the opposition in a historically decisive presidential election.

Third, President Zedillo avoided an economic collapse due to a fortunate combination of elements. On the one hand, very favorable external conditions (high growth in the United States, availability of work for millions of Mexican emigrants)

⁶² The government will have to make huge investments for twenty years in the rescue of the banks, distracting resources from too much needed social policies. This process brought about the visibilization of particularistic arrangements between public officials and private entrepreneurs. The moral damage over the political system this process should have provoked was controlled because the public could not understand what was going on.

⁶³ See López Obrador 1999.

that facilitated a good performance of exports and massive foreign investment in the capital market. On the other, a coherent neoliberal economic policy (which meant macroeconomic stability and relative growth, even at the cost of low salaries and increasing poverty in the countryside). However, the economic recovery is fragile and highly dependent on the performance of the American economy.

Fourth, the PRI overcome the risk of an internal division in the process of designation of its presidential candidate. Governor Roberto Madrazo challenged the President's customary right to choose his successor. He assembled a conservative front a soon two more internal candidates appeared. The PRI avoided an internal crisis by carrying out an unprecedented primary election. Francisco Labastida was elected with the help of the state apparatus, and Madrazo had to accept his defeat. He was rewarded with the return to the government of Tabasco. The success of the overall process further unified the official party at the outset of a competitive presidential race.

From a civil society point of view, recent years have been both a time of increasing visibility and recognition, and a period of growing weakness as the popular components of civil society have lost the capacity of influencing public policies and the political elite acts with great autonomy from society.

V.- The new forms of development of civil society.

The relative normalization of electoral politics from 1997 on has helped to bring to an end the centrality of "post-electoral" struggles as the main form of collective action in Mexico. The federal electoral reform of late 1996 led to a new institutionalization of the "citizen counselors" as a kind of representatives of society before the political system. The results of the 1997 federal and state elections, as

well as those of the 1998 state elections (with the PRD getting three new governorships) created the illusion of the end of the seemingly indefinite process of permanent electoral reform as the specific Mexican way of transition to democracy.⁶⁴

In this framework parties and elections assumed an even stronger centrality in the public space as only means of articulation of political action. In recent times civil actors have hardly managed to get some attention from the media and the public, unless enormous demonstrations forced the media to give them priority.

The recent forms of civic action can be situated in five different levels:

- a) The zapatista Indian movement and the solidarity movement that support its demands.
- b) The formation and persistence of pro-democratic social movements.
- c) The new efforts for the visibilization of civic organizations and their turn to a politics of collaboration and articulation with the government.

The zapatista movement

The government of President Zedillo launched a military offensive against the EZLN in February 1995, hoping for a surprise detention of all EZLN leaders. The government immediately faced massive and rapid popular opposition to a violent solution. After a period of military and judicial offensives, the government scaled back its position.⁶⁵ Learning from their past mistakes, the zapatistas

⁶⁴ Evidently, this is a mistake. The continuity of the clientelistic practices in electoral periods (*compra y coacción del voto*) represents an intolerable violation of political rights.

⁶⁵ In order to find a way out of the legal and political position the government had placed itself in, President Zedillo invited Congress to intervene in the conflict. There already existed a *Comisión Nacional de Intermediación* (National Intermediary Commission), created at the time of the first round of talks in 1994, headed by the bishop of San Cristóbal and consisting of a set of civic figures. This time, the strategy was to

moderated its radical discourse and stressed its Indian composition and demands along with its commitment to democracy. The intervention of Congress into the conflict and the ensuing new talks helped the EZLN regain influence over public opinion and reaffirm its strategy of self-limitation.

After a big success for the *zapatistas* in the negotiations with the government in 1995, when a “Bill of Indian Rights” was agreed upon, the government decided in 1996 to retreat and asked for a renegotiation of the previous agreements. At the same time, the talks about social policy, justice and democracy were *de facto* boycotted by the very government. By the end of 1996, the *Zapatistas* decided to abandon the talks, given that they were leading nowhere. The EZLN conditioned their return to the talks to the actualization of the agreements on Indian rights. The Acteal massacre in 1998 led the process to the worst moment. Since then, the government has kept a constant political offensive against the *zapatistas*. The problem is still there, and no there is no solution at sight.

Interestingly enough, the main form of civic mobilization in the country in this period has been the solidarity movement with the EZLN. The massive spontaneous mobilizations of 1994, 1995 and the recent in 1999 have been the most important episodes of citizen action in recent years. The “consultations” called upon by the

recruit the help of a plural congressional commission to create a law aimed at circumventing the arrest orders issued by a judge against the EZLN leaders. Such a law was written and adopted (*Ley para la Pacificación, la Concordia y la Paz en Chiapas*), with negotiations soon starting again, this time with the participation of all the political parties. The failure of Zedillo’s offensive plan increased the unpopularity of the government.

zapatistas in 1995⁶⁶ and 1999⁶⁷ have been the most successful of them all and maybe the only with authentic national reach, besides Alianza Cívica's electoral monitoring of 1994. The recent consultation of April 1999 mobilized thousands of citizens all around the country in a way unheard of since 1994. This fact shows that at societal level there is a broad agreement about the fact that society had neglected Indian rights, and that there is a necessity of recognizing them legally and factually.

However, the almost spontaneous character of these mobilizations has turned them politically ineffective. They were symbolically relevant, but they were not sustained by a coherent political strategy able to profit from the solidarity of the people. The absence of political direction both from the Zapatista movement and from civil actors has been striking. The explanation seems to be the very way in which the zapatistas have decided to participate in the public realm.

Indeed, since the end of 1996, when the *Zapatistas* decided to abandon the talks, the relationships between the *zapatistas* and the intellectuals and politicians that were helping them in the negotiations began to deteriorate. The *zapatistas* considered that the urban allies were trying to use the Indians to promote their personal political careers. Moreover, given that the *zapatista* leaders could not leave the "area of conflict", the only way to promote a true Indian national

⁶⁶ In the 1995 consultation, called *Consulta Nacional por la Paz y la Democracia*, participated more than one million people. More than 8,000 voting places were set up by the Alianza Cívica, organizer of the "consultation". The main questions were if the people wanted peace and the EZLN to become a "political movement". Most citizens supported the

⁶⁷ The 1999 consultation was carried out directly by the *zapatistas*, who sent almost 5,000 Indians to organize the process throughout the country. Human rights networks, Alianza Cívica members, NGO activists, and PRD militants helped the *zapatistas* to set up voting polls in a massive spontaneous process.

movement was to allow urban figures and movements to establish the necessary connections and networks. The *zapatistas* decided not to open such a window, and they *de facto* “retired” their counselors.

In September of 1997 the EZLN launched a new political initiative: the formation of the Zapatista National Liberation Front (FZLN), which was supposed to be a civil-political movement in support of the EZLN. The problem was that the new organization lacked political direction and leadership. The old intellectual and political allies were excluded from the FZLN because the *zapatistas* wanted to guarantee the political control of the new organization. They did not trust the urban cadres who were so prone to struggle with each other for influence. The left’s tradition of factionalism was a problem the *zapatistas* didn’t want to deal with. But, in doing that, the FZLN lacked since its inception of a program, of leadership and of the necessary political and social networks to become a national social movement.

The EZLN decided to regain the initiative by means of the FZLN, but it failed. The construction of a civil-political space proved to be too difficult in the absence of a professional, charismatic and plural leadership. Urban citizens, who decidedly supported the *zapatistas* in 1994 and 1995, were in favor of the legalization of Indian rights and of the respect of the lives and rights of *zapatistas*. They did not want a civil war, nor the repression of Indians. But they were not interested in the *zapatistas* as a quasi-political movement. On the other hand, in the rest of the Indian regions of Mexico, the conditions that helped to create a

social movement in Chiapas⁶⁸ were absent. No other massive Indian movements emerged, and the *zapatistas* remained politically isolated.

This experience demonstrates that civil campaigns are symbolically important and can stop the government's attempts to finish the Indian problem by the way of massive repression. At the same time, the positive contribution of civil campaigns cannot materialize in terms of rights and institutions unless political actors accept the societal input and create a consensus with the government. Civil politics is the politics of influence, not of decision.

The NGOs. A new form of associationism?

In the last fifteen years the number and variety of NGO,s has increased constantly. Unfortunately we do not have an accurate account of the actual distribution of this kind of organizations. Most civic associations have no legal recognition or have a form of legal existence for which there is no centralized information. This is especially the case with the so-called "civil associations", a legal form of recognition of civil groups which is commonly used because it is uncontrolled by the state. All kinds of associations take this legal form, but the only office centralizing the information about them, the Foreign Affairs Ministry, is closed to open scrutiny. This office itself has no control over civil associations as it only keeps the names, addresses and objectives the organizations register before a notary public in the moment of their constitution. The Foreign Affairs Ministry guarantee only that associations' names are not repeated. If any association is cancelled for any reason, the Ministry lacks a way to know it. Most NGO's and all

⁶⁸ The main condition was Church's activism. Indeed, in Chiapas the Bishop Samuel Ruiz developed an impressive network of religious-civil activists, politically radicalized by LiberationTheory. Without this

recreational, social, cultural, even religious associations are formally “civil

The only way to have an idea of the density of associativism in Mexico is by means of surveys. The best of them was carried out in 1996 by a national network of newspapers (*Reforma*)⁶⁹. It showed that 28% of the urban adult population participated in religious groups; 24% in recreational or sports clubs; 11% in professional associations (including unions); 14% in cultural or educational groups; 13% in groups that promote citizen participation; 8% in groups to assist the poor; and 5% each in ecologist and human rights associations. Discounting the multiple simultaneous participation, it is reasonable to say that around 15% of the urban adult population consider themselves participants in civic associations (excluding religious and recreational groups, which operate in the private realm). This is a surprisingly high figure for a country without civic tradition. In the countryside the figure would have been higher in the area of “professional associations” as there is a long tradition of membership (merely symbolic, as a matter of fact) in peasant organizations. But in terms of civic groups, the figure would have been much lower.

There is no way of comparing the results of this survey with another of similar quality in the past. However, the positive evaluation of civic participation is something recent in Mexico, a phenomenon of the nineties, a result of both the regime’s crisis of legitimation and of the slow but constant process of political liberalization.

network, the *Zapatistas* would have been unable to create their own movement.

⁶⁹ *Reforma*, 15th of July, 1996: 8-9, First Section

Albeit NGOs are just a form this trend takes, it is a fact that this is the most visible form of civil associativism today. The current panorama in terms of number and types of NGOs is the following:

Type of association	Number of NGOs	Source
Environmental	1027	CEMEFI, 1996
Women's	437	FAM, 1996
Human Rights	376	CNDH, 1996
Services to Indian Comm.	270	FAM, 1996
Rural development	200	FAM, 1996
Oriented to human rights	576	CNDH, 1996
Welfare, assistance	1883	CEMEFI, 1996
Art, science and culture	248	CEMEFI, 1996
Total	5,017	

Almost 50% of the NGOs are located in Mexico City. This degree of concentration is even worst than the concentration of population. Indeed, Mexico City Metropolitan area (almost 20 million inhabitants) holds 20% of the national population. Four more cities concentrate another 25% of CSOs (Guadalajara, Tijuana, Oaxaca, Saltillo). Therefore, CSOs are an urban phenomena, a result of the action of relatively privileged (in cultural and economic terms) groups. Indeed, CSOs are mostly formed by professionals and/or educated people (NGO type) or supported by wealthy people (public welfare type).

NGOs constitute a variegated collection of very different civil organizations, some of them are very professional, others are mere family business, some are institutions of the Catholic Church, still others are closely linked to political parties or to conservative groups.⁷⁰ It will be a mistake to offer general conclusions on the sector as a whole. Yet, this is the most visible part of civil society in Mexico, the most directly oriented to the intervention in public matters and the one that performs developmental action. But the size and power of this sector is notably small for such a big country like Mexico.⁷¹

Pro-democratic movements.

In mid-1991, one of the rare moral personalities of the country, Dr. Salvador Nava, an old opposition figure from the Northern state of San Luis Potosí, had achieved what had seemed impossible: to build an opposition front gathering the PAN, the PRD and its own *Frente Cívico Potosino*. This unusual confrontation of the PRI by a broad civic-political alliance attracted the attention of academic institutions and human rights groups. The *Academia Mexicana de Derechos Humanos* observed those elections.⁷² At the same time, the historical mid-term federal elections of 1991 would take place, and other groups became interested in electoral monitoring in Mexico City, especially the *Fundación Rosenbluth* (Convergencia, 1992).

⁷⁰ That is the case of the *Junta de Asistencia Privada* of Mexico City, an institution that controls welfare associations, and whose former leader is closely related to the Catholic hierarchy. See San Juan (forthcoming)

⁷¹ In Brazil there are at least five times as many CSOs as in Mexico. More generally, research on the “third sector” has shown that Mexico has a very low degree of civil organization. See Solomon and Anheir 1999.

⁷² Dr. Nava did not win the election due to a fraud-ridden election, but a massive post-electoral struggle forced the PRI “elected” governor to quit after two weeks of government. Before a new election could be held, Dr Nava died and with him the strongest voice for a united opposition front against the PRI as the only way to defeat the authoritarian regime .

From these experiences emerged a collective concern with elections as a privileged means for the democratic transition. *Convergencia* formed a Commission on Civic Education and Electoral Processes which from then on watched over local and national elections, joining efforts with other academic and civic institutions. It still was a small enterprise: only around 350 people participated as observers in each local election. Yet these experiences helped to affirm the principles of political pluralism, professional objectivity and autonomy from political society and from the state. The NGOs' practice had taken a public character and the collective learning process they helped to launch was also public, instead of private as it used to be in the past.

Prior to the 1994 presidential elections, several civic groups and NGO networks decided to join forces in an effort to monitor the conduct of the electoral process. Over 400 civic groups all around the country joined in the project. As a result, the *Alianza Cívica* was formed, and very soon local chapters were created in 29 out of 31 Mexican states (only Durango and Campeche lacked local chapters). This new level of civic national articulation was the result of a previous learning process through the experience accumulated in the monitoring of state elections (Yucatán, 1990, 1993; San Luis Potosí, 1991; Michoacán, 1992).⁷³

In May, June and July of 1994, nearly 40,000 citizens from around the country participated to monitor almost 2,000 polling locations, to track the amount of time each political party appeared on television (in news coverage and in paid

⁷³ For a complete overview of this process see Aguayo 1998.

advertisement), to monitor the behavior of the electoral institutions and officials at district, state and federal levels and to teach thousands of citizens their basic political rights. The effort did not lead to the very much hoped for triumph of an opposition party.⁷⁴ The official party, the PRI, won again without extensive fraud on the election day.

However, the participants in the experience were not dissuaded. They decided to keep organized nationally in a loose network of local groups, and to keep the name Civic Alliance. The main purpose of the organization was to continue to monitor elections at municipal, state and federal levels, which was considered the only way to force the regime to respect electoral laws and to guarantee fair elections. But soon the Alliance was called upon to perform new civic tasks. The *zapatistas* asked the Alliance to organize in August 1995 a “National Consultation for Peace and Democracy” on matters of Indigenous rights and the future of the *Zapatista* movement in the southern state of Chiapas. The so-called *Consulta Nacional por la Paz y la Democracia* attracted the participation of 1’088’094 citizens, who answered a questionnaire in support of the expansion of Indigenous rights.⁷⁵ A national group of economic organizations asked the Alliance to organize another consultation on matters of economic justice. Less successfully, the civic organization helped to organize a referendum on an alternative national economic policy (*Referéndum de la Libertad*). Only 428,345 signatures were gathered. New consultations were performed in 1996 (*Primera Jornada nacional de Condena a la Política Económica del Gobierno*). This was a symbolic way of

⁷⁴ The massive citizen participation in the *Alianza* has a motivational substratum a shared conviction: an effort to get free and legal elections will lead to the victory of the opposition. See *Encuesta de la Alianza Cívica*

creating an alternative national public space, bringing themes that constituted a severe critique of the political and economic incapacity of the to the national agenda.

At the same time, efforts were made in the terrain of accountability, ranging from a legal suit against the President of the Republic in order to force him legally to deliver information about his salary and the personnel under his direct command, to the monitoring of public expenditures in the state of Tabasco. The different experiences in the struggle for accountability were largely unsuccessful. The judiciary's political dependence on the executive power kept the legal avenues by which to force the government to deliver basic information about its finances and about the privileges of the President effectively shut.⁷⁶

The Civic Alliance introduced several innovations at the level of the public space in Mexico. The very idea of monitoring elections represented the first time that civil society actively (albeit only symbolically) intervened in the electoral process in order to press the government to abide by the law. The monitoring of the media coverage of electoral campaigns was a form of exerting pressure over a media that has always been controlled by the regime. The demand of accountability was a novelty in the Mexican public space. In this sense, the movement was successful.

Perhaps the Civic Alliance's most important innovation has been the impressive plurality of its membership. It is the first national social movement that is not, in some way, politically or ideologically homogenous (with the exception of a

Veracruzana a sus miembros, 1995.

⁷⁵ On the activities and development of the Civil Alliance see Olvera (forthcoming) and Lean 1995.

shared concern for democracy). At the level of the organization's operative directors there was some shared ideological common background (NGO type). But at the grassroots level, variations are the rule. This implies that the Civic Alliance is very different from one state to another. This differentiation in composition, combined with the enormous variety of local political conditions, has led to some notably creative and influential cases, as well as to tremendous and unexpected failures.

Struggles for visibility and political action in civil society.

The 1997 elections changed the national political panorama. The triumph of Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas in the Mexico City's local elections of 1997, and the fact that the opposition parties became the majority in the Chamber of Deputies seemed to open a new opportunity for a collaborative effort between NGO's and parts of the political system. Before these elections, processes of constructive interaction have taken place at the municipal level with different results. But the size of the Mexico City government was so big that the opportunity was completely novel.

However, things proved to be more difficult than imagined. First, the new government lacked both government experience and a clear alternative project. Second, the number, strength and complexity of the multiple interest groups in the city made it very difficult to undertake substantial reforms; the political cost of each step seemed too high for a government under enormous pressure. Third, the new government found that the city budget was already distributed by law. The scarcity of resources was a further obstacle for the development of political innovation. At

⁷⁶ See Olvera, cit.

the same time, the problems of crime, pollution and urban congestion have led to a situation of the virtual collapse of urban life.

The new government worked to improve citizen participation in three different directions. First, it promoted a new law of citizen participation, whose central feature was the creation of the “neighborhood representative” (*representantes vecinales*). 1,200 neighborhood representatives of this type were recently elected in a direct way, that is, without party intervention. The objective was to eliminate political interference in the process and to reduce the influence of corporations and clientelistic popular groups in the election. However, two problems made the experiment almost worthless. On the one hand, the new law gave neighborhood representatives only symbolic powers (proposal of ideas, opinion over existing policies, collaboration in the processing of citizens' demands), but not executive and monitoring capacities. So, Mexico City citizens had no interest whatsoever in an election that they considered futile. On the other, the corporations (both from the PRI and the PRD) ended up controlling the process of election of representatives given the absenteeism of “free” citizens.

The second line of work involved direct collaboration with NGOs and civic organizations in general. Several bilateral committees (social policy, public security, urban development, economic development), as well as an advisory group on matters of civic participation, have been set up since the beginning of 1998. Half of all Mexican NGOs are located in Mexico City, so it was feasible to expect a good number of joint initiatives. However, experience has demonstrated that, with a few exceptions, for NGOs is difficult to move beyond the limited horizon of local, small and specialized projects.

The *Plataforma de Organismos Civiles por la Democracia* was created in late 1997 as a coordination of the majority of the NGO's networks. Its main aim was to centralize the participation of the sector in a collaborative effort with the new Government of the city in the area of definition and implementation of public policies. The results were minimal.⁷⁷ A few important general proposals were developed in response to the formation of these bilateral commissions, while the government was flooded with demands for economic support for very specific projects. The technical, administrative and lobbying capacity of NGOs networks and associations proved to be quite limited. The government of the city had few innovative ideas as well. Therefore, the main positive experiences are mostly occurring on a small scale.

The third line of work was the definition of a new concept of social policy, that is, the policies oriented to offer public services and to steer the development of the city. The new government was trying to break down the institutions and practices that reproduce clientelism and dependence. There were efforts to design a new housing policy, a project to decentralize health services, increased attention to sports activities, cultural activities and civic centers, all considered components of a public space that needs to be revitalized. The lack of resources has inhibited the full development of these more innovative projects of the new government, in

⁷⁷ The *Centro de Estudios Antonio de Montesinos* has carried out an evaluation of this experience.

which the participation of some civil society leaders and organizations was important.⁷⁸

On the side of the internal effects of these encounters in NGOs there is now enough experience in Mexico City and in several cities of the country as to indicate that they are mainly the following:⁷⁹

a) Loss of leaders and personnel to the government. NGOs are affected when their main leaders become public officials. The lack of internal institutionalization and high personalization of decision-making worsen the organizational effect of this loss.

b) This translation from the society to the government creates a problem of identity within the NGO's, which are perceived by the public as public agencies, or as organizations that have lost their autonomy and even their legitimacy.⁸⁰

c) The critical capacity of NGOs before the government diminishes as their cadres become part of the government.⁸¹

V.- The new challenges

Today, Mexico is experiencing the end of an era. The defeat of the official party, the Institutional Revolutionary Party, in the presidential elections on 2 July 2000, marks the decline of the 20th century's longest lasting authoritarian régime. The electoral phase of the long democratic transition process has almost come to

⁷⁸ Carlos San Juan is carrying out an analysis of these experiences as a part of an overall project on Civil Society and Governance in Mexico, coordinated by the author of this paper.

⁷⁹ See Alianza Cívica 1999.

⁸⁰ This is what happened in Cd. Obregón, Sonora, where Alianza Cívica's main local leaders became high-rank officials in the PRD-led municipal government.

⁸¹ See Alianza Cívica, cit.

an end, although the legality and fairness of state and municipal elections in the southeast of the country remain unguaranteed. That said, the new defeat of the PRI in the Chiapas elections on August 20, 2000, and in Yucatán on May 27th, 2001⁸², indicates that vote buying and coercion are already insufficient strategies for maintaining the hegemony of the PRI. A phase is now beginning in which the relationships between the State and society will have to be radically reformed, along with the rules, customs, practices and institutions that allowed corporatism and patron-client relationships to continue. There will also have to be a genuine rule of law. It is safe to say that the defeat of the régime is a result of the prolonged mobilization of Mexican civil society in favor of democracy.

Towards a Balance: A View of the Recent Changes in Civil Society and the Process of Democratic Transition.

The development of civil society is a long-term process. Civil society contributes in four main senses to the construction of an authentically democratic public life. First, civil society needs to create, stabilize and expand the rule of law. Second, a vibrant civil society forms different public spaces by means of which social actors communicate with each other and with political actors. Third, civil society develops a dense network of associations, strengthening the social fabric. Fourth, civil society help to create and generalize a culture of tolerance and respect for the other.

Civil society is still too weak in Mexico in all the four senses outlined above. The explanation of this weakness has to do above all with the historical legacy of

⁸² In both cases new governors were elected. In Chiapas Pablo Salazar Mendiguchía, a former member of the PRI, won as a candidate of a the coalition of all opposition parties. In Yucatán a panista politician won by

the Mexican authoritarian regime. The corporatist system was enormously successful in terms of its capacity to integrate popular and class actors into the political regime. Collective action was action in and towards the state, all aspiration of autonomy being repressed. The fact that the state was the main economic driving force led to the political subordination of the bourgeoisie as well. The rule of law was completely ignored, the public space was monopolized by the state and tolerance was relative.

During the phase of declination of corporatism (1972-1989), new social actors appeared on stage (independent unionism, new peasant movement, the student movement, new associations of entrepreneurs). The main forms of collective action were popular mobilizations and the constitution of nacional coordinating bodies (*coordinadoras*) of unions, peasant organizations and urban dwellers groups. Benefiting from an initial process of political liberalization, these movements, especially independent unionism, first grew and then declined due to the economic crisis of the eighties and their own political incapacity to overcome the “low-intensity war” the official corporations fought against them. In the countryside and in the cities, the extreme economic dependency of both, peasant organizations and dwellers groups led them to new forms of integration into the political realm, either by state cooptation or by integration in the opposition parties.

The impossibility of achieving a true freedom of association without previously defeating politically the regime, forced most social actors to channel their efforts and initiative to the electoral arena. The conjuncture opened by the 1988 electoral insurrection was defined by the centrality of massive struggles in the

means of a broad coalition.

electoral terrain all over the country. Class conflicts became less visible and more and more local in character. Probably social conflict was as intense as before, even with more participants, but the arenas multiplied as the regime lost its former unity and its capacity to absorb or repress at will autonomous actors. The fact that the opposition parties began to govern more and more municipalities and even states, further complicating the political panorama.

New types of movements appeared in the late eighties and early nineties, precisely as formerly autonomous movements were defeated or routinized. They were urban-cultural, and most of them directed their activities toward the defense of human rights or the promotion of local social and economic development. As a consequence of a specific learning process, they formed networks and alliances whose effect was to publicize and extend their action.

The urban cultural movements of this period were “new” insofar as they made the regime’s authoritarian character visible and publicized democratic values as something genuinely new in the Mexican political culture. They were also novel in ideologically transcending local and economic aims; rather, their self-understanding was civic and general, and they were plural, principled actors. They were organized as loose networks without formal institutionalization. In furthering their aims, they appealed to the public sphere of society.

These movements criticized the regime in a new way: They not only pointed out the contradiction between legitimacy and legality, but also broke the regime’s moral and practical monopoly over social policy. By proposing and even implementing (at however small a scale) new forms of resolving social problems with the direct participation of the people, NGOs demonstrated that there are

alternatives to populist and clientelist social policies. At a different level, pro-democratic social movements struggled for rights and democracy without instrumental political aims, then creating a new public practice.

However, these new forms of collective action produced limited results. NGOs act in local settings, work with small groups and lack the economic, organizational and professional capacity to go beyond the micro level. Pro-democratic movements were more successful as they created new public spaces, put in the center of the national agenda the respect for political rights and contributed in a decisive way to the design, creation, and operation of the new electoral laws and institutions that are furthering electoral democracy in Mexico.

Moreover, as the case of the Civic Alliance demonstrates, pro-democratic movements introduced the principle of citizen monitoring on the government and developed “public consultations”, which in fact were campaigns to introduce new themes in the national public agenda. However, both practices have had little political impact so far. The Civic Alliance has been successful in symbolic terms, but less so in legal and institutional terms.

The fact that Mexico lives through a “half transition to democracy” diminishes the civil capacity of mobilization in the electoral terrain and pushes the pro-democratic movement towards professionalization and specialization. Citizen monitoring on government performance cannot be carried out by a social movement. Monitoring asks for technical, legal and organizational capabilities that require institutionalization and permanence, that is, the formation of specialized NGOs. This tension between movement and organization has led the Civic Alliance to an organizational paralysis, lack of direction and loss of public presence.

Popular movements of national significance in the past decade have been scarce. The Indian insurrection in Chiapas brought to the fore the almost absolute lack of rights for the Indian population. The EZLN helped to create a broad national agreement on the issue of Indian rights, but it was unable to create a national Indian movement and to turn the urban solidarity movement into a political force. The political stalemate between the government and the EZLN has been paralyzing and has led to a "low intensity war" in Chiapas whose human cost is too high.

El Barzón marked the activation of social groups traditionally invisible. But it was a defensive movement, quiet diverse along states and even localities. Too soon it became a sort of clientelistic association with competing leaders turned professional politicians. Routinization was more powerful a force than innovation.

The main achievement of the nineties has been the institutionalization of electoral democracy and the increasing respect of political rights. However, this is an incomplete process at the state and local levels in at least half the country. This form of democratization coexists with a generalized lack of respect for labor rights and even for civil and human rights in the rural areas of the country. Civil society still lacks operative rights, especially its popular components.

The current tension between the growth and consolidation of civil society and the expansion of the public sphere on the one hand, and the increased social anxiety arising from both the economic problems of the majority population and the prolongation of the transition, on the other, exposes the danger inherent in the present conjuncture.

Political actors seem to understand the urgent need for answers, but resistances within the PRI may prove greater than those confronting authoritarian forces in other countries. Indeed, the Mexican regime is far more entrenched in daily life; it is highly institutionalized, overarching, involved in all areas of social reproduction. The opposition is divided and acts inconsistently. There is a danger of emergence of an antipolitical mood at public level if the PRI wins again and this led to the delegitimatization of party politics.

Civil society is too weak today to stop such a process. Having engaged in “citizen politics” in the last few years, the most visible sectors of civil society can fall into despair if their efforts are not traduced in legislative and institutional gains and new forms of policy-making. The question is if civil actors can find the way to open the spaces of constructive interaction with the government under the new conditions.

The still very young Mexican civil society requires the consolidation of the democratic transition. A new cycle of democratic deepening should begin, meaning the extension of democracy to all aspects of public life. The only way to do it is forcing both the state and social actors to abide by the law. Only under the rule of law can the freedom of association be actually enjoyed, the human, civil and political rights of the poor respected and the government controlled (relatively) by an acting citizenry. The new cycle implies profound institutional and legal reforms, more citizen participation in public life, more public spaces and the leveling of basic living conditions. Only an active civil society can push such a program.

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