POLITICS IN MEXICO

Roderic Ai Camp

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To My Teachers

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Acknowledgments

Anyone who has been in the business of teaching eventually writes a mental textbook, constantly revised and presented orally in a series of lectures. As teachers, however, we often dream of writing just the right book for our special interest or course. Such a book naturally incorporates our own biases and objectives. It also builds on the knowledge and experiences of dozens of other teachers. While still a teenager, I thought of being a teacher, and perhaps unusually, a college professor. Teachers throughout my life, at all levels of my education, influenced this choice. They have also affected the way in which I have taught, my interrelationship with students, and my philosophy of learning and life. To these varied influences, I offer heartfelt thanks, and hope that this work, in some small way, repays their contributions to me personally and professionally, and to generations of other students.

Among those special teachers, I want to mention Thelma Roberts and Helen Weishaupt, who devoted their lives to the betterment of young children, instilling worthy values and beliefs and setting admirable personal examples, and to Mrs. Lloyd, for numerous afternoon conversations at Cambridge School. I wish to thank Ralph Corder and Don Fallis, who encouraged my natural interest in history toward a more specific interest in social studies. Sharon Williams and Richard W. Gully, my toughest high school teachers, introduced me to serious research, and the joys of investigating intellectual issues; and Inez Fallis, through four years of Spanish, prompted my continued interest in Mexico. Robert V. Edwards and Katharine Blair stressed the importance of communication, orally and in writing, helping me understand essential ingredients in the process of instruction. My most challenging professor, Dr. Bergel, during a high school program at Chapman College, opened my eyes to Western civilization, and to the intellectual feast that broad interdisciplinary teaching could offer.

For his humanity, advice, and skill with the English language, I remain indebted to George Landon. As a mentor in the classroom and a

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Indirectly, I owe thanks to hundreds of students who have graced my classrooms and responded enthusiastically, sometimes less so, to my interpretations of Mexican politics. I am equally indebted to Bill Beezely, David Dent, Oscar Martínez, and Edward J. Williams, devoted teachers and scholars, who offered many helpful suggestions for this book.

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Mexico in Comparative Context

> Neither this authoritarian interpretation nor the democratic interpretation which preceded it sufficiently explain Mexican politics. Although the authoritarian model seems more defensible, a more thorough reexamination of the political system is needed. Such a reexamination must be grounded in the roots of contemporary Mexico. More scholars need to follow Arnaldo Córdoba's lead and look to the Revolution for answers. . . . What emerged was a leviathan state capable of controlling society.
>
> DONALD J. MABRY, "Changing Models of Mexican Politics"

An exploration of a society's politics is by nature all-encompassing. Political behavior and political processes are a reflection of a culture's evolution, involving history, geography, values, ethnicity, religion, internal and external relationships, and much more. As social scientists, we often pursue the strategies of the modern journalist in our attempt to understand the political news of the moment, ignoring the medley of influences from the past.

Naturally, each individual tends to examine another culture's characteristics, political or otherwise, from his or her own society's perspective. This is not only a product of one's ethnocentrism, thinking of your society as superior to the next person's, for which we Americans are often criticized, but also a question of familiarity. Although we often are woefully ignorant of our own society's political processes and institutions, being more familiar with the mythology than actual practice, we become accustomed to our way of doing things in our own country.[1]

I will attempt to explain Mexican politics, building on this natural proclivity to relate most comfortably to our own political customs, by drawing on implied as well as explicit comparisons to the United States. We are also products of a more comprehensive Western European civiliza-

tion, into which other traditions are gradually making significant inroads. Although some critics suggest that we have relied too exclusively on Western traditions in our education, they are unquestionably the primary source of our political values. Thus, our familiarity with political processes, if it extends at all beyond United States boundaries, is typically that of the western European nations and England.[2] For recent immigrants, of course, that heritage is different. Again, where possible, comparisons will be drawn to some of these political systems in order to place the Mexican experience in a larger context. Finally, Mexico is a Third World country, a category into which most countries fall, and hence its characteristics deserve to be compared to characteristics we might encounter elsewhere in the Third World.

WHY COMPARE POLITICAL CULTURES?

The comparison of political systems is an exciting enterprise. One reason that the study of politics in different societies and time periods has intrigued inquiring minds for generations is the central question: Which political system is best? Identifying the "best" political system, other than its merely being the one with which you are most familiar and consequently comfortable, is, of course, a subjective task. It depends largely on what you want out of your political system. The demands made on a political system and its ability to respond efficiently and appropriately to them are one way of measuring its effectiveness.

Throughout the twentieth century perhaps the major issue attracting the social scientist, the statesperson, and the average, educated citizen is which political system contributes most positively to economic growth and societal development. From an ideological perspective, much of international politics since World War II has focused primarily on that issue. As Peter Klarén concluded, "U.S. policymakers searched for arguments to counter Soviet claims that Marxism represented a better alternative for development in the Third World than did Western capitalism. At the same time U.S. scholars began to study in earnest the causes of underdevelopment. In particular scholars asked why the West had developed and why most of the rest of the world had not."[3]

The two political systems most heavily analyzed since 1945 have been democratic capitalism and Soviet-style socialism. Each has its pluses and minuses, depending on individual values and perspectives. Given recent events in eastern Europe and the breakup of the Soviet state, socialism is in decline. Nevertheless, socialism as a model is not yet dead, nor is it likely

to be in the future. Administrators of the socialist model rather than the weaknesses inherent in the ideology can always be blamed for its failures. Furthermore, it is human nature to want alternative choices in every facet of life. Politics is just one facet, even if somewhat all-encompassing. The history of humankind reveals a continual competition between alternative political models.

In short, whether one chooses democratic capitalism, a fresh version of socialism, or some other hybrid ideological alternative, societies and citizens will continue to search for the most viable political processes to bring about economic and social benefits. Because most of the earth's peoples are economically underprivileged, they want immediate results. Often, politicians from less fortunate nations seek a solution through emulating wealthier (First World) nations. Mexico's leaders and its populace are no exception to this general pattern.

One of the major issues facing Mexico's leaders is the nature of its capitalist model, and the degree to which Mexico should pursue a strategy of economic development patterned after that of the United States. Since 1988 they have sought to alter many traditional relationships between government and the private sector, increasing the influence of the private sector in an attempt to reverse Mexico's economic crisis and stimulate economic growth. In fact, Mexico received international notice in the 1990s for the level and pace of change under President Carlos Salinas de Gortari.[4]

Salinas in public statements and political rhetoric has called for economic and political modernization. He has explicitly incorporated political with economic change, even implying a linkage.[5] Thus, he advocates economic liberalization, which he defines as increased control of the economy by the private sector; more extensive foreign investment; and internationalization of the Mexican economy through expanded trade and formal commercial relationships with the United States and Canada. Simultaneously, Salinas advocates political liberalization, which he defines as including more citizen participation in elections, greater electoral competition, and integrity in the voting process—all features associated with the United States and European liberal political traditions.

It is hotly debated among social scientists whether a society's political model determines its economic success or whether its economic model produces its political characteristics. Whether capitalism affects the behavior of a political model or a political model is essential to successful capitalism leads to the classic chicken-and-egg argument. It may well be a moot point because the processes are interrelated in terms of not only institutional patterns but cultural patterns as well.[6]

The comparative study of politics reveals, to some extent, a more

important consideration. If the average Mexican is asked to choose between more political freedom or greater economic growth, as it affects him or her personally, the typical choice is the latter.[7] This is true in other Third World countries too. People with inadequate incomes are much more likely to worry about bread-and-butter issues than about more political freedom. A country's political model becomes paramount, however, when its citizens draw a connection between economic growth (as related to improving their own standard of living), and the political system. If they believe the political system, and not just the leadership itself, is largely responsible for economic development, it will have important repercussions on their political values and their political behavior. If Mexicans draw such a connection, it will change the nature of their demands on the political leadership and system, and the level and intensity of their participation.[8]

The comparative study of societies provides a framework by which we can measure the advantages and disadvantages of political models as they impact on economic growth. Of course, economic growth itself is not the only differentiating consequence. Some political leaders are equally concerned, in some cases more concerned, with social justice. Social justice may be interpreted in numerous ways. One way is to think of it as a means of redistributing wealth. For example, we often assume that economic growth, the percentage by which a society's economic productivity expands in a given time period, automatically conveys equal benefits to each member of the society. More attention is paid to the level of growth, than to its beneficiaries. It is frequently the case that the lowest-income

Social justice: a concept focusing on each citizen's quality of life and the equal treatment of all citizens.

groups benefit least from economic growth. This has been true in the United States, but is even more noticeable in Third World and Latin American countries. There are periods, of course, when economic growth produces greater equality in income distribution.[9] Per capita income figures (national income divided by total population) can be deceiving because they are averages. In Mexico, for example, even during the sustained growth of the 1950s and 1960s, the real purchasing power (ability to buy goods and services) of the working classes actually declined.[10] Higher-income groups increased their proportion of national income from the 1970s to the 1990s, decades of economic crisis, and that of the lower-income groups declined.[11]

Another way of interpreting social justice is on the basis of social equality. This does not mean that all people are equal in ability but that

each individual should be treated equally under the law. Social justice also implies a leveling of differences in opportunities to succeed, giving each person equal access to society's resources. Accordingly, its allocation of resources can be a measure of a political system.

The degree to which a political system protects the rights of all citizens is another criterion by which political models can be compared. In Mexico, where human rights abuses are a serious problem, the evidence is unequivocal that the poor are much more likely to be the victims than are members of the middle and upper classes. The same can be said about many societies, but sharp differences in degree exist between highly industrialized nations and Third World nations.[12]

From a comparative perspective, then, we may want to test the abilities of political systems to eliminate both economic and social inequalities. It is logical to believe that among the political models where the population has a significant voice in making decisions, the people across the board obtain a larger share of the societal resources. On the other hand, it is possible to argue, as in the case of Cuba, that an authoritarian model can impose more widespread, immediate equality in the distribution of resources, even in the absence of economic growth, while reducing the standard of living for formerly favored groups.

Regarding social justice and its relationship to various political models, leaders are also concerned with the distribution of wealth and resources *among* nations, not just within an individual nation. The choice of a political model, therefore, often involves international considerations. Such considerations are particularly important to countries that have achieved independence in the twentieth century, especially after 1945. These countries want to achieve not only economic but also political and cultural independence. Although Mexico, like most of Latin America, achieved political independence in the early nineteenth century, it found itself in the shadow of an extremely powerful neighbor. Its proximity to the United States eventually led to its losing half of its territory and many natural resources.

A third means to compare political models is ability to remake a citizenry. A problem faced by most nations, especially in their infancy, is to build a sense of nationalism. A sense of nationalism is difficult to erase, even after years of domination by another power, as in the case of the Soviet Union and the Baltic republics, but is equally difficult to establish, especially in societies incorporating diverse cultural, ethnic, and religious heritages.[13] The political process can be used to mold citizens, to bring about a strong sense of national unity, while lessening or dampening local and regional loyalties. The acceptability of a political model, its very

legitimacy among the citizenry, is a measure of its effectiveness in developing national sensibilities. Mexico, which had an abiding sense of regionalism, struggled for many decades to achieve a strong sense of national unity and pride.[14] On the other hand, Mexico did not have sharp religious and ethnic differences, characteristic of other cultures, such as India, to overcome.

Many scholars have suggested that the single most important issue governing relationships among nations in the twenty-first century will be that of the haves versus the have nots.[15] In fact, the probability that Mexico might be linked to the United States and Canada in a free trade agreement highlights the point. One of the arguments against such an agreement is the impossibility of eliminating trade barriers between a nation whose per capita wage is one-seventh of the per capita wage of the other nation.[16] One of the arguments for such an agreement is that it could temper the disparity.

The dichotomy between rich and poor nations is likely to produce immense tensions in the future, yet the problems both sets of nations face are remarkably similar. As the 1990 World Values Survey illustrates, an extraordinary movement in the coincidence of some national values is afoot, for example, in the realm of ecology. This survey, which covers forty countries, discovered that from 1981 to 1990 an enormous change in concern about environmental issues occurred in poor as well as rich nations. Other problems that most countries, regardless of their standard of living or political system share include availability of natural resources, notably energy; production of foodstuffs, especially grains; level of inflation; size of national debt; access to social services, including health care; inadequate housing; and maldistribution of wealth.

Another reason that examining political systems from a comparative perspective is useful is personal. As a student of other cultures you can learn more about your own political system by reexamining attitudes and practices long taken for granted. In the same way a student of foreign languages comes to appreciate more clearly the syntax and structure of his or her native tongue, and the incursions of other languages in its constructions and meanings, so too does the student of political systems gain. Comparisons not only enhance your knowledge of the political system within which you live but are likely to increase your appreciation of selected features.

Examining a culture's politics implicitly delves into its values and attitudes. As we move quickly into an increasingly interdependent world, knowledge of other cultures is essential to being well educated. Comparative knowledge, however, allows you to test your values against those

of other cultures. How do yours measure up? Do other sets of values have applicability in your society? Are they more or less appropriate to your society? Why? For example, one of the reasons that considerable misunderstanding exists between the United States and Mexico is a differing view of the meaning of political democracy. Many Mexicans attach features to the word *democracy* that are not attached to its definition in the United States.[17] For example, as will be discussed later, for many Mexicans, democracy does not incorporate tolerance for opposing viewpoints. Problems arise when people do not realize they are using a different vocabulary when discussing the same issue.

Another reason for striking out on the path of comparing political cultures is to dispel the notion that Western, industrialized nations have all of the solutions. It is natural to think of the exchange of ideas favoring the most technologically developed nations, including Japan, Germany, and the United States. Solutions do not rely on technologies alone; in fact, most rely on human skills. In other words, how do people do things? This is true whether we are analyzing politics or increasing sales in the marketplace. Technologies can improve efficiency, quality, and output of goods and services, yet their application raises critical human issues revolving around values, attitudes, and interpersonal relationships. For example, the Japanese have a management philosophy governing employee and employer relations. It has nothing to do with technology. Many observers believe, however, that the philosophy in operation produces better human relationships and higher economic productivity. Accordingly, it is touted as an alternative model in the workplace. The broader the scope of human understanding, the greater our potential for identifying and solving human-made problems.

Finally, as a student new to the study of other cultures, you may be least interested in the long-term contributions such knowledge can make for its own sake. Yet, our ability to explain differences and similarities between and among political systems and, more important, their consequences, is essential to the growth of political knowledge. Although not always the case, it is generally true that the more you know about something and the more you understand its behavior, the more you can explain its behavior. This type of knowledge allows social scientists to create new theories of politics and political behavior, some of which can be applied to your own political system as well as to other cultures. It also allows, keeping in mind the limitations of human behavior, some level of prediction. In other words, given certain types of institutions and specific political conditions, social scientists can predict that political behavior is likely to follow certain patterns.

SOME INTERPRETATIONS OF THE MEXICAN SYSTEM

We suggested above that social scientists set for themselves the task of formulating some broad questions about the nature of a political system and its political processes. A variety of acceptable approaches exist from which to examine political systems individually or comparatively. Some approaches tend to focus on relationships among political institutions and the functions each institution performs. Other approaches give greater weight to societal values and attitudes, and the consequences these have for political behavior and the institutional features characterizing a political system. Still other approaches, especially in the last third of the twentieth century, place greater emphasis on economic relationships and the influence of social or income groups on political decisions. Taking this last approach a step further, many analysts of Third World countries, including Mexico, focus on international economic influences and their effect on domestic political structures.

Choosing any one approach to explain the nature of political behavior has advantages once you undertake to describe a political system. In my own experience, however, I have never become convinced that one approach offers an adequate explanation. I believe, however, that an examination of political processes or functions entails the fewest prejudices, and that by pursuing how and where these functions occur, one uncovers the contributions of other approaches.[18] An eclectic approach to politics, incorporating culture, history, geography, and external relations, provides the most adequate and accurate vision of contemporary political behavior. Such an eclectic approach, combining the advantages of each, will be used in this book.

In general, the study of Mexican politics has provoked continued debate about which features impact most on political behavior, and more commonly, to what degree is Mexico an authoritarian model.[19] It is important, as we begin this exploratory task, to offer some explanations about the nature of Mexican politics.

Does Mexico have an authoritarian political system? The answer simply is yes. Is Mexican politics in the same authoritarian category as Cuba under Fidel Castro, China since the Communist Revolution, or the Soviet Union before 1991? The answer definitely is no. Mexico can best be described as a semiauthoritarian political system—a hybrid of political liberalism and authoritarianism that gives it a special quality or flavor—

that is well documented institutionally in the 1917 Constitution, currently in effect.

Mexico's unique authoritarianism sets it apart from many other societies, including Latin American countries that have passed through long periods of authoritarian control, especially in the 1970s and 1980s.[20] Normally, *authoritarian* refers to a political system in which fewer individuals have access to the decision-making process, and fewer still are in a position to exercise important political choices and policies.

What sets Mexico's authoritarian system apart from many others is that it allows much greater access to the decision-making process and, more important, its decision makers change frequently.[21] Usually, the advantage of a well-established authoritarian regime is continuity. Whereas it is fair to say that successive generations of Mexican leaders, with ties to

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Authoritarian: in political terms, a system in which only a small number of individuals exercise and have access to political power.

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their predecessors, have controlled the decision-making process, this has not led necessarily to continuity in policy. Furthermore, its leadership, in the hands of the executive branch, especially the president, is limited to a six-year term.

A second feature of the Mexican political model, integral to its hybrid authoritarianism, is a special feature found in many Latin American cultures: *corporatism*. Corporatism in this political context refers to how groups in society relate to the government, or more broadly the state; the process through which they channel their demands to the government; and how the government responds to their demands.[22] In the United States, any introductory course in U.S. politics devotes some time to interest groups, and how they present their demands to the political system. Mexico, which inherited the concept of corporatism from Spain, instituted a corporate relationship between the state and various important interest or social groups in the 1930s, primarily under the presidency of General Lázaro

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Corporatism: the more formal relationship between selected groups or institutions, and the government or state.

Cárdenas (1934–1940). This means that the government took the initiative to strengthen various groups, creating umbrella organizations to house them and through which their demands could be presented. The govern-