



© Jesus Verdugo/Cuartoscuro.com

Sign, left: And where's the money from #fuerzamexico? Sign, right: Earthquake victims united.

Margarita Favela Gavia*

Politics Looks at the Earthquake Or the Earthquake Looks at Politics?¹ Looking at 1985 and 2017

The September 19, 2017 earthquake inevitably reminds us of the other earthquake 32 years before; that was a turning point for part of society, among others, a group of social scientists. Therefore, we tend to look at the more recent one from the same standpoint: we want this earthquake to be a new turning point in the country's social and political life.

The September 19, 1985 earthquake was exceptional because the country had not recently seen a massive mobilization of the citizenry like the one that emerged to help the victims. But it was even more remarkable because it reflected the vitality of society, which organized autonomously and "spontaneously" in view of the paralysis of both local and federal governments, which could

do nothing more than deny the magnitude of the calamity they were confronting.

In contrast, the population so resoundingly organized and carried out rescue work and support for those affected that its innumerable demonstrations of heroism and solidarity amazed people both here and abroad. In fact, this response became almost a myth that ennobles and empowers us as part of our nation.

Some have tried to see in these expressions of social vitality, full of altruism and generosity, the main forces

We tend to see in the 1985
earthquake a tectonic shift that
freed up long-contained social energy,
opening the way for the country's
transformation.

* Researcher at the Center for Interdisciplinary Research in Sciences and the Humanities (CEIICH), UNAM; dfavelag@unam.mx.

behind the political transformations of the following years, mainly in Mexico City. Among the latter are the city's change in status and the creation of institutions that guarantee our rights as full citizens. But that is not all: also numbered among the transformations is the germ of the transition that finally led to parties alternating in office and in the legislature. So, we tend to see in the 1985 earthquake a tectonic shift that freed up long-contained social energy that opened the way for the country's transformation.

And that is what happened. But I think we need to identify the components of that process to be able to understand what occurred and what may be emerging today, after an event similar to the one a little over three decades ago.

In 1985, in addition to the impressive solidarity of the rescue workers and brigades in the moments immediately after the earthquake, the backbone of the victims' undeniable victory over the tragedy they were facing—but above all, their victory over the many and truly ignominious attempts by both government and business community to take advantage of their precarious situation to gain huge political and economic advantages—was the collective strength that was constituted and exercised as a single voice. That possibility was based on the already-existing organization among many of the most hard-hit groups: the neighborhood associations in the Guerrero, Morelos, and Tepito areas of the city; the Coordinating Committee of Tlatelolco Residents and those of many other popular neighborhoods, members of the National Coordinating Committee of the Urban Popular Movement (Conamup), which were the basis and the example for residents of the Doctores, Roma, Condesa, Juárez, and Cu-

Governmental actors continue to have fundamentally the same intentions as in 1985: to prevent citizens' organization and achieve political advantages and economic benefits.



Ginette Riquelme/Reuters

auhtémoc Neighborhoods to work together. Jointly, they took action until they founded the United Coordinating Committee of Earthquake Victims (CUD). This organization weathered an arduous negotiation, plagued with moments of critical confrontations with government representatives, that managed to conceive and put into practice a Housing Reconstruction Plan that fulfilled a large part of the victims' demands. It was that victory's spectacular novelty and scope that created the basis for a citizenry rooted in experience in Mexico City.

What Is Happening Now?

In a certain sense, we see actors who are similar but also different. Governmental actors continue to have fundamentally the same intentions: to prevent citizens' organization and achieve political advantages and economic benefits. Basically, those affected by the earthquakes mainly want justice and to recover their homes and belongings. However, in addition to that part of civil society that once again spontaneously came out to generously offer solidarity and support to the victims, another part of society wants to ensure that the resolution of the emergency does not reinforce local political bosses or guarantee impunity, much less cover up misuse of funds and further illicit enrichment of individuals.

Now what we are seeing is that, given the characteristics of the event and the real estate speculation rampant in Mexico City, like the rest of the world's great

Information is manipulated differently than in 1985, when data was lacking.

Today, the strategy is the reverse: putting out a multiplicity of versions, turning the tragedy into a media show.

globalized cities, particularly since the beginning of the twenty-first century, the earthquake victims are atomized, and, generally speaking, lack organizational experience in neighborhood groupings. They also do not have what is required to deal with a situation like they are experiencing now of suddenly being completely dispossessed. That is why, as they create those forms of organization to make a common front that will allow them to increase their negotiating clout vis-à-vis the realtors and the governments, the tasks of non-governmental organizations are crucial. Thirty-two years ago, they didn't exist, or they were very incipient and inexperienced; today, they are a real force that, by defending the interests of third parties, also defends its own.

The "third party" participation is becoming fundamental in demanding a citizens' solution to the emergency from the get-go. And this is a confrontation, a relationship of forces, more or less peaceful or violent according to the circumstances and the reasons involved, between different projects. As I was saying, what matters above all to those heading public administration is that the critical moment be gotten over as soon as possible, that calm returns, that we return to normalcy, to the daily routine. And this is not only because that way, the society that mobilized will be demobilized and once again be manageable and governable, but also because, if the magnitude of the tragedy is seemingly eased, the legitimacy of the demands decreases in the same proportion. That is, we return to "politics as usual."

This means that the earthquake victims' demands will be treated like all other requests from the citizenry. That is, they will be sent on up the line of the bureaucracy to be dealt with each in turn. Meanwhile, as the indignation at the "marks of corruption" becomes blurrier together with the marks themselves, so do the victims' demands and the support from society lose strength. That is why "removing" the rubble is urgent, as is "facilitat-

ing" reconstruction. This has been done by pushing not one, but several plans for support with which the federal and local bureaucracies shuffle through possibilities, determine needs, propose mechanisms, and play around with amounts that are always ephemeral and provisional; their main intent is to disconcert, distract, and confuse not only those directly affected, but also us "third parties," the entire public.

Information is manipulated differently than in 1985, when data was lacking. Today, the strategy is the reverse: putting out a multiplicity of versions, turning the tragedy into a media show with fleeting declarations, as society continues to wait for "official figures" to be able to construct at least minimal certainties to operate by. But, perhaps this is the moment for breaking with this perverse game and continuing with the experience that platforms like #Verificado19s (September 19 Verification) or #Epicentro (Epicenter) began when they created their own data bases to organize rescue efforts, the stockpiling of public donations for the earthquake victims, and distribution of those donations. Initiatives like "Nosotros" (Us) or #PartidosDenSuDinero (Parties Give Your Money), or lawyer Luis Manuel Pérez de Acha's bringing charges of homicide against those responsible for 48 collapsed buildings should continue and do it autonomously,² not only as proposals to monitor the situation, but also as spaces for building autonomy for the citizenry's activity.

The unequal powers confronting each other today are even more unequal when we look at "rural" areas, both in Mexico City (Xochimilco and Tláhuac) and in the states of Puebla, Oaxaca, and Chiapas. There, the lack of organization is more visible and "politics as usual" does nothing but deepen inequality and the precariousness of the lives of those who have the least.

If we want this September 19 to be a watershed as it was in 1985, we have to look around us and work with those whose voices we have not heard up until now. ▼

▼ Notes

1 A previous version of this text was presented at the seminar "Between the Earth that Shakes and a Society Shaken to the Core," held October 3, 2017, at the UNAM's CEIICH.

2 "Autoridades cometieron homicidio culposo tras sismos: Pérez de Acha," Oaxaca político, October 4, 2017, <http://oaxacapolitico.com/cdmx/seguridad/autoridades-cometieron-homicidio-culposo-tras-sismos-perez-de-acha>. [Editor's Note.]