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Earthquake victims organize to protest non-response by government to their demands and needs.

Jorge Cadena Roa*

Anti-Politics and Post-Truth Earthquakes and Knowledge With No Consequences

If we had to give the September 2017 earthquake a name like we give hurricanes, we would have to call it “IToldYouSo,” because it brought us face to face with what we already knew: corruption, violations of the building code, orders to shut down construction sites that were never carried out, and other acts by the authorities that are nothing new. A report by the UNAM Seismology

and Engineering Groups (gst) reads, “A serious problem is known to exist due to non-compliance with the norms stipulated in the current building regulations.”¹

Seismic Certainty

We also knew that Mexico City is not in a seismic risk area, but in a seismic certainty area, due to the interaction of five tectonic plates: the North America, Cocos, Pacific, Rivera, and Caribbean Plates. Some earthquakes

* Researcher at the UNAM Center for Interdisciplinary Studies in the Sciences and Humanities (CEIICH); cadenaroa@gmail.com; https://www.researchgate.net/profile/orge_Cadena-Roa.

are caused by inter-plate movements (those that happen at the border of two tectonic plates); others, like the recent September 19 quake, are intra-plate (those that take place within a tectonic plate).² The National Seismological Service (SSN) reports an average of 40 quakes a day.³

We have no doubt, then, that Mexico City and other places throughout the country will experience earthquakes again, though we do not know when or where, or how intense and what kind of damage they will cause. We do know, however, that the damage will depend on the distance from the quake's epicenter and the kind of constructions and terrain that exist. Depending on the latter, certain areas face greater risks than others, and that should be reflected in the kind of constructions allowed there. "We all know," reiterates the GSI report, "that a large part of Mexico City is built on soft sediment of what used to be the lakes in the valley. This sediment amplifies the seismic waves in Mexico City enormously,"⁴ affecting, among others, the Roma, Condesa, Downtown, and Doctores Neighborhoods. There, the seismic waves can be magnified up to 50 times more than on solid ground. The movement also lasts much longer in areas with soft sediment. That means that "the majority of damage [caused by the September 19, 2017 earthquake] is to be found in the western part of the sediment basin, in the transition area, and part of the soft terrain, very near the western border."⁵ It is so clear that we knew this that it is fully documented in the risk atlases,⁶ which were not widely known because certain people thought that their dissemination could affect land values and the interests of real estate businesses. Who would buy buildings in transition areas? But even if there were builders and buyers for these areas, shouldn't the authorities prohibit construction or set more stringent standards for building there?

So, *we all knew*, for all the good it did. This is knowledge with no practical consequences. That is why this

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earthquake and other disasters are not purely and simply natural phenomena: they are also social and political disasters, worsened by the irrational disconnect between means and ends. What we know does not affect what we do; risks and costs are not reduced, and human and material losses, pain, and suffering are not prevented.

Anti-Politics

The response of political parties to the emergency, victim rescue, the care for the homeless, and reconstruction became politicized—in the bad sense of the word. This was not something these bodies debated in order to find the best ways to intervene; rather, the debate was carried out in terms of "office politics," or what you mean when you say "somebody in the office wants to screw me."

Amidst the emergency and the pain, some parties tried to take advantage of the moment to sling mud at the others. The Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) proposals to reduce public funding to all political parties and eliminate Chamber of Deputies seats elected by proportional representation are a clear example. They were not even viable since both these rights are guaranteed in the Constitution (the former in Article 41, Section II, Clause *a*; and the latter in Article 52).⁷ The federal electoral process for which they were proposing those changes had already begun a few days before the earthquake, again, making them inoperable.⁸

If the proposals were unviable, what purpose did they serve? Discounting the possibility that they were motivated by ignorance, the only remaining possibility is that the motivation was bad faith. The intention was to stir up the generalized anti-party feelings and then blame the others for the measures not being implemented. The political merit would be for the proponents; the costs would fall to those who opposed the measure, for whatever reason. We should remember that the PRI proposal that the parties renounce part of their funding and deposit it in a fund operated at the discretion of the president of Mexico sparked the demand for the resignation of the political commentators of the first edition of the NRM Comunicaciones media corporation radio news program *Enfoque* (Focus).⁹

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and foster mistrust —already high in any case— without taking into account that this irresponsible attitude would only feed anti-politics thinking, thus shooting themselves in the foot. Fostering anti-politics thinking is very dangerous: it discredits institutions and opens up the way for personality- and caudillo-based, opportunistic, populist, messianic politicians. It fosters the belief that what the country needs are leaders whose personal characteristics separate them from the rest and who are capable of changing things by themselves. It ignores the fact that what exist in politics are not individuals, but groups; that in democracies, political parties continue to be indispensable for creating a national representation and filling out the branches of government. Increasing the discredit of politics, politicians, and representative institutions opens up the way to anti-institutional, authoritarian adventures. Anti-politics and the consequences of fostering it are widely known, but we act as though they were not.

Post-Truth

Anti-politics is linked to knowledge because we live in an era of post-truth, in which political groups and other interested parties knowingly lie, with no attempt to back up their statements with evidence, only in seeking to manipulate in their favor the existing widespread resentment about the undesired effects of globalization and other issues.

The link between anti-politics and post-truth prompts us to look at the institutions dedicated to producing and disseminating scientific knowledge, culture, and innovation. These are, of course, the universities, which worldwide —but particularly in Mexico— are the institutions that are most trusted by the public. In times of anti-politics and post-truth and manipulation of information, grievances, and resentment, universities and academics have the duty and the commitment to base their statements on data and evidence, unmask lies, and make viable proposals.

These activities, which are opposed to anti-politics and post-truth, can make universities and their academic personnel uncomfortable for society. We can do no less than note the denunciations about what has been called the “master fraud,” in which high-ranking officials from some universities are accused of colluding with federal

authorities to commit multi-million-peso fraud.¹⁰ We must demand a thorough investigation of these cases and that they be prosecuted to the full extent of the law because, when not proven or clarified, they undermine public confidence. However, it is precisely now, in the time of campaigns and elections, of anti-politics and post-truth, that the attacks on universities and some academics in particular ratchet up. The *Enfoque* radio news program incident can be considered censorship of university academics because the three people involved (Leonardo Curzio, María Amparo Casar, and Ricardo Raphael) are academics who were commentators in different media. What should be done in the face of threats to universities and academics? We must protect their prestige and the trust the public has placed in them.

The Game Must Go On

How can the distance between the political class and society be remedied? Here, the ball is in society’s court. Certainly, several volleys have been sent into the political class’s court, but they either stay there or they are returned with the balls deflated, stopping the game. Despite this, society must not allow this to stop the game, leaving things as they are. The game must go on; the changes society wants must be made. It was civil society that proposed the Anti-corruption System, welcomed as a transcendental achievement. Nevertheless, the system is not operating; we do not have an anti-corruption prosecutor.

We are entering an electoral period, but the special prosecutor for electoral issues was deposed October 20 for “violating the institution’s code of conduct” while investigating the alleged funding by the Brazilian company Odebrecht of President Enrique Peña Nieto’s election campaign. In mid-December 2017, a new special prosecu-

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tor was appointed, but nothing has been said about the investigation that had been underway. As I write this article, we continue without a federal attorney general. The previous one resigned October 27, 2017 amid the process of designating the new federal prosecutor.¹¹ Corruption, criminality, and impunity are three of the problems most keenly felt by the population, and we have no prosecutors to prosecute them. This shows that the citizenry's demands are being received and responded to but incompletely and without any effect in practice.

Corrupt public officials debase politics and public service because things like impunity have allowed these activities to turn into something probably more lucrative than any in private business, with the additional advantages that they require very little investment and involve minimal risk. In politics, public officials can amass incalculable fortunes in only a few years. As long as this continues, as long as politics continues to be an activity in which you can steal with impunity, the most ambitious and unscrupulous individuals will continue to be attracted to it; and we will continue to be governed by a “strongman-ocracy,” the worst of the worst.

The Immediate Future

Very probably Mexico City will experience a bigger earthquake than the September 19, 2017 event. The GSI report states that “under the coast of Guerrero state . . . is a 250-kilometer-long seismic gap . . . where an earthquake of over 8 [on the Richter scale] could occur. This segment is about 300 kilometers from Mexico City.”¹² That we know. Now, if we want to reduce the loss of life and property after a quake of that size, we must assume the consequences of what we know, which is no small thing. The task before us is to change from a country where know-

ing something is more or less useless, to one where knowledge informs and shapes private and public decisions. ■■■

Notes

1 Grupos de Sismología e Ingeniería de la UNAM, “Qué ocurrió el 19 de septiembre de 2017 en México,” September 23, 2017, p. 8, http://usuarios.geofisica.unam.mx/cruz/Nota_Divulgacion_Sismo_19092017.pdf.

2 See José Pablo Espíndola, “Sismos interplaca e intraplaca, ¿cuáles son las diferencias?” Science and Health Section, *El Universal*, October 20, 2017, <http://www.eluniversal.com.mx/ciencia-y-salud/ciencia/sismos-interplaca-e-intraplaca-cuales-son-las-diferencias>. [Editor’s Note.]

3 Grupo de Trabajo del Servicio Sismológico Nacional, “Reporte especial. Sismo del día 19 de septiembre de 2017, Puebla-Morelos (M7.1)” (Mexico City: GTSSN, UNAM, 2017), p. 7, http://www.ssn.unam.mx/sismicidad/reportes-especiales/2017/ssnm_x_rep_esp_20170919_Puebla-Morelos_m71.pdf.

4 Grupos de Sismología e Ingeniería de la UNAM, op. cit., p. 3.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 8.

6 See http://www.atlas.cdmx.gob.mx/zonificacion_sismica.html.

7 Article 41, Section II, Clause a) reads, “Public financing for their regular activities will be fixed annually, multiplying the total number of citizens registered on electoral rolls by 65 percent of the daily value of the Measuring and Update Unit.” Article 52 of the Constitution reads, “The Chamber of Deputies will be composed of 300 deputies elected according to the principle of relative majority . . . and 200 deputies elected according to the principle of proportional representation.” *Constitución Política de los Estados Unidos Mexicanos*, <https://www.juridicas.unam.mx/legislacion/ordenamiento/constitucion-politica-de-los-estados-unidos-mexicanos#10581> and <https://www.juridicas.unam.mx/legislacion/ordenamiento/constitucion-politica-de-los-estados-unidos-mexicanos#10597>.

8 According to Article 225 of the General Law on Electoral Institutions and Procedures (LEGIPE), “The ordinary electoral process begins in September of the year prior to election year and concludes with the decision and declaration of validity of the election for the president of the United Mexican States.” LEGIPE, January 2017, <https://www.juridicas.unam.mx/legislacion/ordenamiento/ley-general-de-instituciones-y-procedimientos-electorales>.

9 *Enfoque* news program commentators Ricardo Raphael and María Amparo Casar and the program director, journalist and researcher Leonardo Curzio, resigned after attempts to censor them and to protest the pressure they were subjected to after they had stated that the proposal by the PRI and other parties to earmark electoral funds for reconstruction were unviable and illegal and intended to fool the public and make political hay in a deliberately unethical manner. [Editor’s Note.]

10 “La estafa maestra. Graduados en desaparecer dinero público,” *Animal político*, <https://www.animalpolitico.com/estafa-maestra/>.

11 Mexico’s prosecutorial system recently changed from being headed by a presidentially-appointed attorney general to a Senate-appointed, autonomous federal prosecutor. However, the process bogged down over the debate about whether the outgoing attorney general should automatically become the first federal prosecutor. [Translator’s Note.]

12 Grupos de Sismología e Ingeniería de la UNAM, op. cit., p. 9.