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The Earthquakes' Social And Political Rubble Mistrust of Government Institutions

Like any unforeseen and traumatic event—especially those that have potentially disastrous consequences for our lives—the earthquakes that hit Mexico in September last year shook not only the tectonic plates underneath the ground. They also shook the fractured social and political foundations of a country marked by issues as diverse as inequality, poverty, corruption, and insecurity. The September 7, 19, and 23, 2017 earthquakes, in addition to causing physical destruction in 9 states and 699 municipalities, revealed unresolved problems underlying Mexican society, problems that have been accumulating for years, waiting to be released like the energy freed by seismic shock waves. In the follow-

ing pages, I present some reflections about the difficult social and political issues—the rubble—that these earthquakes have made us turn and look at again.

A Critical Look at the Rubble

We could look at the positive side of the issues sketched below, seeing the glass as half full, highlighting, for example, the role of civil society organizations in reconstruction, or emphasizing those cases—exceptional or not—in which victims were rescued from the rubble. However, it is also useful to maintain a critical perspective in order to distance ourselves from simplistic euphemisms and political acquiescence. To change things, we must first recognize problems; that is what enables us to think

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about potential solutions. The goal of the reflections that I propose below is to look at the social and political rubble left behind by the earthquakes in order to recognize our issues as a society, and, from that point of departure, build the capacity to generate changes.

Mistrust of Institutions

Numerous opinion polls and sociological analyses amply document that distrust contaminates the government-citizen relationship in Mexico.¹ Citizens do not trust their governmental and state institutions. Although this distrust can have a productive function, whereby civil society acts like a “watchdog” over government, relationships based exclusively on distrust may also lead, as we will see below, to destructive apathy and citizens’ disenchantment.

We find evidence of productive distrust in initiatives that civil society organizations took to monitor the post-earthquake reconstruction process. A couple of weeks after the quakes, and after having exhausted actions to rescue victims and care for the injured, civil society began floating initiatives to monitor reconstruction efforts. Virtual platforms such as “Epicentro,” “Reconstrucción,” and “Fuerza México,” led by civic, professional, academic, and business organizations, emerged to make reconstruction proposals and to monitor government actions. If we stop to take a look at the course of action and proposals of one of these initiatives, Epicentro, we find indicators of mistrust of government institutions.

Epicentro, an initiative launched by some 30 organizations at the start of October 2017, within weeks had doubled in size to involve some 60 organizations. It defines itself as a “civic platform that seeks to promote and coordinate citizen participation for national reconstruction and the rebuilding of trust between society and government.”² This definition speaks clearly of a lack of trust

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in public institutions. Epicentro’s proposals, like those of other civic initiatives, are grounded in the citizenry’s distrust of the work of governments and the state.

The citizens who have raised their voices in this initiative do not trust the way in which public resources are used. One of the primary goals of the Epicentro platform is to monitor the destination and use of public resources and, by doing so, make transparent the methodologies and data relating to reconstruction. Nor do these citizens trust governmental procedures to deal with social problems. That is why they explicitly proposed that reconstruction should be based upon the needs of the affected communities—as if there was any reasonable alternative. This statement of the obvious reveals that citizens distrust, from experience, governmental work: many public programs have been criticized for the distance—and even the contradiction—that tends to exist between their design and the real needs of the target population.³ Finally, as I illustrate below, citizens active with Epicentro do not simply distrust government institutions; they actively claim that government approaches to emergencies such as those caused by the earthquakes tend to reproduce a vicious cycle of poverty-disaster-poverty.⁴

Lack of Citizen Participation

As mentioned above, distrust of public institutions might very well encourage forms of citizenship that lead to an absence of engagement in public life. In Mexico, about 60 percent of eligible citizens participate in elections.⁵ But, beyond this minimal participation, the bare bones of representative democracy, citizens are not interested in or motivated to engage in activities oriented toward the common good.

It is true that since the 1980s—and particularly following the major earthquake of 1985—citizens have started to organize to try to fill in the holes that state activities are no longer able to cover. However, this impulse to collective action has not turned into new institutional patterns, nor has it set up a new social contract. During the earthquakes of last September, members of Mexican civil society rushed into the streets to work together and help others. However, it seems that it is only in the face of tragedy that Mexicans unite, cooperate, and actively participate to solve what harms others and ourselves.

Only in such contexts does a spirit of solidarity emerge, a spirit that we forget in daily life, marked by individualism and stress, and in everyday politics, filled with brawls, lies, and omissions.

As happened after the earthquake of 1985, in 2017 once again Mexican civil society went above and beyond all expectations to try to help the victims and the injured through various means. Whether this impulse was part of the altruistic side of human nature (selflessly helping others) or psychological self-interest (to help oneself feel better in the face of widespread tragedy), the fact is that citizen participation flowed freely, especially in the first days and weeks after the earthquakes. The downside was that, once life started returning to normal, especially for those who had not been directly impacted by the tragedy, participation ebbed. After a month, everything seemed to return to normal. Yes, to a normality characterized by disinterest, apathy, and non-participation.

The Rubble of Authoritarianism

Distrust and lack of civic participation are not isolated phenomena. They have been nurtured by a political culture emanating from a government that, for decades—or centuries, if we go back to the shaping of the Mexican state—based itself on the building blocks of authoritarianism: elitism, lack of transparency, patron-client relations, dependency, and corruption. While in some ways these building blocks have been falling apart in recent decades, in others they have been resilient, because we have not been able to construct solid democratic foundations to put in their place.

Simply by browsing through the news since the earthquakes hit, it is easy to find cases of political opportunism, in which authorities or parties have tried to take advantage of the tragedy for political gain. After September 19, in response to citizens' demands, we saw party representatives competing in a grotesque precursor to the elections to see who would donate the highest proportion of their taxpayer-funded 2018 campaign support to reconstruction efforts. As if in an auction, figures began being tossed around in a disrespectful game of "who will give the most?" If one committed to donate 25 percent, then the next one bid 50 percent, until someone threw out the idea of 100 percent. All this posturing was without

any realistic foundation, since public funds set aside for political parties' campaigns cannot legally be redirected to earthquake victims or reconstruction. (Mexican electoral laws prohibit using funds for activities other than those for which they are earmarked.)

Another case that illustrates this authoritarian political culture is the patron-client, personalized, and welfare-dependency aspect of the "help" given to earthquake victims. When Mexico's president, a state governor, or another state official personally delivered National Disaster Fund cards (intended to support the rebuilding of damaged or destroyed residences), such resources were positioned as a "favor" or an "act of charity" rather than as a right. Many families who lost their homes, particularly those in rural and semi-urban areas, were already living in impoverished circumstances. Such families experience a vicious cycle whereby their socio-economic marginalization is reinforced by the disrespect of their political rights by state actors, leaving them as easy prey for patron-client relations designed to preserve dependency. In the face of such "generous actions," the disaster victims feel grateful toward the public figure (the patron, the boss) who gives them "help," a situation that only leaves them even more vulnerable and dependent. Such victims are doubly violated: once by their tragic circumstances and again by their rights not being recognized.

The final building block of authoritarianism that we find amidst the rubble of the recent earthquakes is corruption, which has further complicated the reconstruction process. There is no shortage of examples of officials who delivered food and supplies donated by civil society stamped with the logo of a political party or government agency. Citizens reported such violations in the states of Puebla, Morelos, Michoacán, and in Mexico City. Prosecutors have formally investigated seven public officials and one congresswoman for electoral crimes associated with this misleading practice.⁶ Likewise, corruption reared its head in the actions of other civil servants. One case

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was reported in the town of Jojutla, Morelos, one of the places most severely affected by the earthquakes, where municipal workers unjustifiably demanded payment of Mex\$6000 for the demolition of damaged residences.⁷

Concluding Thoughts

The examples presented in this article are only a small sample of those that illustrate that we continue to reproduce an authoritarian political culture that does not allow us to build solid foundations for a truly just and democratic society. Undoubtedly, as suggested by members of civil society organizations who participated in the Civil Society Dialogue: Community-Led Reconstruction,⁸ after the 2017 earthquakes, we face a major challenge as a country. That challenge is to remove the rubble, not only the physical aftermath of the earthquakes, but also the social and political mess that we keep reproducing. After the earthquakes, and in the face of the rubble, we need to rebuild socially and politically. The challenge is not simply to repair damaged homes and buildings, but rather also to reconstruct the community, its social fabric, its economic and productive systems, its cultural circuits, and its spaces for socialization. At the same time, we must also promote political reconstruction, both in terms of political-institutional structures, and in terms of the forms of government-citizens relationships. **NMM**

Notes

- 1 See, for example, Latinobarómetro reports (<http://www.latino-barometro.org/latContents.jsp>) and the Country Report published by the Federal Electoral Institute and El Colegio de México in 2014 (<http://www.contraloria.cdmx.gob.mx/docs/InfPaisCalidadCiudadania.pdf>).
- 2 Transparencia Mexicana, “#Epicentro: Plataforma cívica para reconstrucción social con integridad,” October 1, 2017, <https://www.tm.org.mx/epicentrocom/>, accessed January 29, 2018.
- 3 Various programs seek to promote social development in Mexico, but their evaluations have not been encouraging. See, for example, Coneval, “Informe de evaluación de la política de desarrollo social en México” (Mexico City: Coneval, 2008).
- 4 Cohesión Social, “Lineamientos para la reconstrucción,” October 18, 2017, <http://www.cohesionsocial.mx/objetivos-y-causas/frente-a-pobreza-y-desigualdad/nuestras-propuestas/lineamientos-para-la-reconstruccion>, accessed January 29, 2018.
- 5 Integralia, “Primer reporte electoral 2018,” http://integralia.com.mx/content/publicaciones/035/Primer%20reporte%20electoral%202018_vf.pdf, accessed in January 2018.
- 6 *Animal Político*, “Un alcalde, una diputada y un gobernador investigados por mal uso de víveres para damnificados,” October 12, 2017, <http://www.animalpolitico.com/2017/10/fepade-casos-uso-politico-co-viveres-sismo/>, accessed January 30, 2018.
- 7 Benito Jiménez, “Piden moche de \$6 mil por demolición en Jojutla,” *Reforma* (Mexico City), November 5, 2017, <http://www.reforma.com/aplicaciones/libre/preacceso/articulo/default.aspx?id=1250081&v=3&urlredirect=https://www.reforma.com/aplicaciones/articulo/default.aspx?id=1250081&v=3>, accessed January 31, 2018.
- 8 This dialogue took place December 7, 2017 at the UNAM National School of Social Work, with the participation of organizations and affected communities. To read the minutes, see The Hunger Project Mexico, “Diálogos para la reconstrucción liderada por las comunidades,” December 13, 2017, <https://thp.org.mx/2017/12/13/dialogos-para-la-reconstruccion-liderada-por-las-comunidades/>, accessed January 31, 2018.