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September 19 Youth and National Unity

An earthquake on the same day that the country commemorates the devastation of another, 32 years prior, cannot help but cause panic and collective hysteria. Perhaps it was this repetition, hard to find at any other moment in history, and the collective memory of the first experience, that led many, many young people in the Valley of Mexico metropolitan area to act promptly, with dedication and solidarity, and, above all, with the leadership we witnessed.

I work on two projects at the UNAM Institute for Social Research (iss) with five women and five men between the ages of 21 and 27. In our work meetings after the earthquake, we never stopped talking about the many experiences that come with living and suffering through an

event like this. For these young people, what comes to mind first and foremost is undoubtedly its impact, just like for me in 1985, when I was as young as they are now. I'll never forget it. The big difference was that in their case, social media provided them with an enormous amount of information, making it a milestone.

Given that one of the projects we work on is a diagnostic analysis of the way the interaction of social strata, ethnic origin, gender, place of study or work, and place of residence, among other factors, influence people's attitudes and decisions, we decided that we had to make room in our research project to find out why young people acted so efficiently and with so much solidarity.¹

So, we included new categories for analysis, which I will present here.² We observed that young people had an impact on society by 1) showing moral leadership; 2) acting as agents for change; and 3) breaking with stereo-

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types. I should add that these categories were conceived based on conversations or comments heard and read in the different ways that oral and written memory are transmitted.

Moral Leadership

Given the many collapsed buildings, the mountains of rubble, the clouds of dust, the chaos, the desperation, and the frustration, there were many lives to save. But people perceived the official strategy as slow, insufficient, and even inappropriate. That is why many young people immediately took on the task of organizing themselves to move rocks, take away rubble, distribute aid, etc. With these actions, they seemed to have taken over the city and its environs on September 19 and the days that followed. That moment was key for exerting strong moral pressure so that the search for and rescue of those trapped did not stop, despite the government attitude of giving up in the face of the apparent impossibility of finding more people alive as time went on.

Soon, the federal and local governments began to re-define their organization and logistics; they increased and improved rescue efforts and allowed foreign teams to help, reporting to the media about those rescued.

This moral leadership by young people—but not only them—had two other strains: the great humanitarianism they displayed in gathering and distributing food, and the decision to act compassionately regarding pets.

Agents for Change

The events put to the test the density of social and digital media as well as of national and international users. Even though I left my cubicle in University City quickly when the seismic alarm sounded, I managed to take my

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cell phone with me. This meant that, when the shaking stopped, I realized that I already had five messages from friends and relatives abroad asking how we were. I don't know if there is any way to determine how national social media behaved to this same end, since the uncertainty and terror exacerbated our obsession with immediate communication, slowing it down.

I recognize that I re-sent an unverified piece of news; my 21-year-old son responded instantly telling me to not send that kind of information in order to control the overwhelming number of fake news stories that could create panic or conflicts. I also remembered that, in this context, unwise transmission of messages would cause the networks to collapse. This kind of communication between my son and me is by no means an isolated phenomenon: many, many people like him responded clearly to the critical situation. It seems to me—and this is a personal perception shared by some colleagues and friends—that many men and women over 40 behaved irresponsibly on social media. This means that, their understanding of how to behave in digital communications allowed these young people to ensure that the collapse of social media was not worse than it was. Proof of that was their efficiency in distributing aid and rescue and donation efforts.

Breaking with Stereotypes

Many people think “ninis” (those who neither study nor work) and millennials are the prototype of urban youth. This is a stereotype, and, as we know, stereotypes are generalizations. So, many think that young people are apathetic, uninterested in society, and that they spend their time hunkered down in front of a screen, isolated and ill-tempered.

In my research team meetings, some members often commented that they knew young people like this, but that, contrary to the expectations we have about these kinds of stereotypes, these young people went out onto the street and looked for a way to help, developing forms of organization that turned out to be very effective for saving lives. They also constructed or made visible a non-verbal language, like raising their fists to ask for silence if they heard a murmur that might be a sign of life under the rubble; this was also a powerful use of silence itself. These were symbolic languages on the social media that

were undoubtedly moving due to the sensitive situation and the successful call they made for solidarity.

Of all the kinds of natural disasters, earthquakes prompt a massive social response difficult to achieve at other times: national unity, “Mexico is still standing,” was repeated over and over on official radio broadcasts. From the earthquakes that plagued Ecuador in the colonial period to the recent quakes in Japan, China, Chile, and Papua New Guinea, clearly these events promote social cohesion because the tragedy and suffering they bring are intense given how unpredictable and uncontrollable nature is and the fact that they affect rich and poor alike, without regard for ethnic origin or age. Therefore, earthquakes cause fear and desperation, but they are also an irreplaceable opportunity for generating change or new phenomena.

In this kind of context, heroes emerge. This was the case of the nun Mariana of Jesús de Paredes, Ecuador’s patron saint, who died in 1645 after doing penance several times to calm the bowels of the Earth and mitigate the devastation and distress in the face of the impossibility of stopping the effects of the plague and the natural phenomena among the population. Known as “The Lily of Quito,” she is part of that people’s historic memory, particularly in times that could affect the stability of that Andean city.

In Mexico, after last year’s earthquake, the heroic image of young people has grown for the three reasons stated above, but also because they managed to expose acts of corruption linked, among other things, to bad practices by real estate and construction companies. In addition, the synergy among those young people made it possible to trace the distribution of the numerous donations for reconstruction.

So, the heroes and heroines multiplied everywhere all the time. Referring to young people in no way implies that we’re talking about a fixed, homogeneous category. Precisely, the diagnostic analysis we will be carrying out in the research projects I head at the UNAM will explore more deeply the gaps separating young people in the metropolitan area by looking at the interaction among variables like social strata and ethnic origin. However, what I want to underline here is that, through their multiple actions, they called for national unity, relying on the collective feeling of solidarity, hope, and the desire to rebuild. While this was the case at the time, the possibility does exist of making that communion something that

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allows for future encounters among people despite our diversity and the existing inequality.

To conclude, I think that many young people showed an enormous capacity for helping without thinking of recompense; they showed their humanitarian, compassionate side; they made the nation turn and look at itself amidst misfortune. Undoubtedly, the social media helped in the middle of that catastrophe, which, in an unhappy coincidence, also occurred on September 19. It is worth exploring how the memory of the first September 19 was transmitted; if it was from parents, grandparents, family members, or friends, and if that unifying thread, that flow of memory, was an important reason for activating so much determination and dedication. A natural disaster changes our lives and makes us make unforeseen decisions.

For 32 years, our young people have been nourished by collective memory; they have become aware of their importance and why we must be alert in those moments when facing uncertainty. Nevertheless, their leadership and innovative capacity has seemingly retreated in recent months amidst the election campaigns. The nation’s social and political environment is shot through with anger and uncertainty. People are fed up; phobias toward this or that candidate sharpen; hate speech and verbal attacks abound, while memes fly across the social media. In these elections, we will have another opportunity to look at ourselves as a nation and not forget the social fortitude forged by young people last September 19. ■■■

▼ Notes

1 For more information about Dr. Gutiérrez Chong’s work, see http://www.iis.unam.mx/indexcontent.php?_module=86. [Editor’s Note.]

2 I also had the opportunity of sharing these categories at the meeting held at the IIS November 13 and 14, 2017, “Jóvenes e identidades: rescate y organización. Las ciencias sociales frente a los sismos de 2017: algunas reflexiones” (Young People and Identities: Rescue and Organization. The Social Sciences and the 2017 Earthquakes, Some Reflections).