

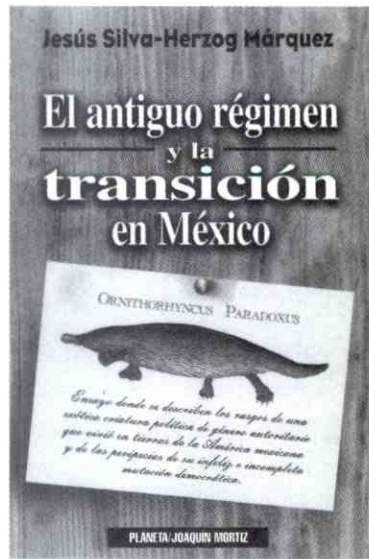
El antiguo régimen y la transición en México

(The Ancien Régime and the Transition in Mexico)

Jesús Silva-Herzog Márquez

Planeta Joaquín Mortiz

Mexico City, 1999, 150 pp.



Practically no political actor, academic or media opinion maker has refrained from expressing him or herself about the transition to democracy in Mexico. In the last few years, the issue has been fashionable in the political sciences, political journalism, and even in the party or institutional speeches of members of both the government and the opposition. It is so widespread that one could practically argue that a whole new branch of political science has been born: “transitology.”

While this trend is not restricted to Mexico alone (let us not forget the pioneering work by Juan J. Linz, Guillermo O’Donnell, Phillipe Schmitter and Laurence Whitehead), here it has become the driving force behind political change and, therefore, the banner of politicians and parties.

In this context, the publication of Jesús Silva-Herzog Márquez’ book is a pleasant surprise. Using a forceful style unhesitatingly without undue concern for the consequences, it describes a process that while it means a positive and encouraging change in Mexico’s political life also brings with it serious risks due to the equivocal way it has been carried out. Among those

risks is the permanent danger of a reversal, but not the complete restoration of authoritarianism.

Speaking metaphorically, Silva-Herzog Márquez is the architect who designed a building which, in the first part, “The Ancien Régime,” establishes the foundation for understanding recent political developments, explored in the second part, “The Transition.” The book concludes with an excellent epilogue, full of warnings and questions that could make the entire edifice quake.

For many political analysts and actors, Mexico’s is probably the longest transition to democracy in history. Silva-Herzog Márquez even warns that sometimes one gets the impression that the process is no longer a process but has become an institution in itself, a regimen. This peculiar political regimen that prevails in Mexico could be called a “transitocracy.” However, the author himself actually holds a different position. For him, the transition concluded at the moment in which transparent, independent, legitimate electoral procedures were established and functioning in Mexico, guaranteeing real political competition in conditions of equality. This does not mean —far from it— that the country can boast of being in a state of “democratic normalcy.” What the future holds is the consolidation of democracy, which has as its primary task the redesign of democratic institutions, the transformation of political culture and the creation of a participatory citizenry with full political rights. This road is full of obstacles as well as the worrisome signs of current Mexican politics that indicate difficult times ahead, times of institutional breaks.

One of Silva-Herzog Márquez’ undeniable merits is his penetrating depiction of the main problems being faced in the transition. He dedicates a chapter, for example, to the analysis of the none-too-encouraging current situation of our party system, pointing to the fact that “the big three” (the National Action Party [PAN], the Party of the Democratic Revolution [PRD] and the Institutional Revolutionary Party [PRI]) in the main have not contributed positively to the transition because they have all centered on furthering their own ends and not on forging consensus and common national projects that any successful transition needs. The author concludes, then, that the future of our party system is at risk since if the parties continue in this vein, some of them may well not survive the year 2000’s elections.

His diagnosis includes other boulders on the road of transition, which makes the Mexican process *sui generis* and not

comparable to that of examples like Spain, Eastern Europe or even other Latin American nations. No climate of national reconciliation has been created, for example, or even a sincere coming together in search of consensus. Rather, those who should head up the transition have either adopted Jacobin strategies (the total elimination of the ancien régime), or they have tried to mold the new circumstances to the political past and effect a restoration. The former, observes Silva-Herzog Márquez correctly, have fallen into “democratism,” that infantile disorder of democracy, which sees in it the magical, mechanical solution for all evils; they even propose changing traditional, democratic, representative institutions into a “popular” democracy based on a diffuse civil society. The latter hold fast to more or less cosmetic transformations in a kind of democratic obfuscation.

The prospects, then, do not lend themselves to optimism because the Mexican transition has not had the actors it needs. In a certain sense, as Silva-Herzog Márquez very aptly puts it, it is a transition with no head. The process itself has outstripped the actors.

Another merit of this brief book is that it may be read in different ways given that it is a collection of essays, each of which stands alone. It is part of the author’s architectural purpose that we may explore each room without having to go into the others.

I would recommend reading above all the second part of the book and the epilogue, the rooms where Silva-Herzog Márquez makes his real contributions.

Diego Bugada Bernal
Editor-in-Chief



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