

Mexico City Fulcrum

August, 1998

We walked through an outlying neighborhood Sunday at noon. Families were coming out of church, and the streets were cluttered with vendors of cheap clothing and sticky soda bottles. Each family sailed along like a self-contained boat, Papa, Mama and the children, dressed for church. And the smallest girl, the little princess with hair pulled high and adorned with ribbon. Her ankle-length dress of white satin, ruffled in tiers, extended further side-to-side than front-to-back. Beneath the dress I could see tiny ankles encased in stockings, and shiny patent leather shoes. The child carried a little purse.

“Where’s the dog?” I wondered aloud.

“What dog are you talking about?” George inquired.

“There’s always a dog in the paintings.” The Spanish Royal Infantas portrayed by Goya were the model, come to life complete to the last bit of fake lace. But no beribboned lap dog trotted alongside this Infanta. Not even the gaunt-ribbed gangs of unwanted dogs that roam alleys of impoverished neighborhoods.

North America was colonized by white Protestant Europeans. Central and South America were colonized by Spanish and Portuguese Catholics.

The difference in the “racial” attitudes between Protestants and Catholics was distinct, and thereby hangs the history of Indians on the continent. Protestants usually would not intermarry with “savages”. Customs, skin color and language is what made them savage to the eyes of European invaders. Catholics would, and did intermarry, because by definition a Catholic could not be a savage. All that was required was religious conversion. The Spanish did not hesitate to torture, enslave and maim those who refused to convert. But savagery was curable, merely by accepting the One True Faith.

“Race” in Mexico, as in so many other parts of the world, has not become a lifelong mark based on physical birth features, as in the

racial discrimination practiced in the USA. Rather, “race” in Mexico is a different construct altogether, inherited from conquest, appropriation of lands, and forcible conversion of the native population not only to Catholicism but also to Spanish culture and language. In Mexico, Indians who were not subsequently intermarried, absorbed or eliminated, remain now as a subordinated class. But if they choose at any time to join “mainstream” Mexico through education and acculturation, skin color or appearance is not an obstacle or marker. In Mexico, language, education, culture and class determine status. By clinging to transformed remnants of nearly destroyed cultures many indios have kept themselves intact. Many more have become bi-cultural, learning Spanish, receiving the standard education, dressing themselves and their children as the mainstream population does – sometimes modeled on the Infanta, more often on modern USA styles of jeans and polyester. Those who have not joined remain the others - the conquered. The price they pay for refusing to assimilate is victimization by “racism”.

Twenty-three million Mexicans live in poverty. Fifteen million are monolingual indigenous people.

Mexico City is so large that pots boil all over; maybe six public demonstrations in a single day. In 1995, a total of 2,522 demonstrations were recorded.

We arrived from Chiapas with distinct culture shock. When we flew in two hours from a rural state to a massive modern city, we flew away from the harmless rope across the neighborhood intersection, with coffee served by protesters, to a volatile city where protesters more likely served flying rocks. Fresh from rough living in Chiapas we booked into a tourist hotel, with bland tourist/Mex food brought by waiters who clearly disdained our inadequate Spanish in favor of speaking English, and not a warm tortilla lay in sight or on the menu. I blessed the hot showers with soap and towels, the mildew-free carpeted corridors. How scruffy I had become! How bland the hotel!

In the two years since the signing of NAFTA, the Mexican people have experienced a 20% decline in real wages. As a result, 50% of all people working do so in the “informal” sector, and pay no taxes, increasing the government debt problems.

In fact, espacios ingobernabilidad (ungovernable spaces) are carved out everywhere. They include more than booths of vendors located on the sidewalk in front of the church. They support more than the enormous black market bazaars where anything can be bought, from used car parts to sex videos, in colonias where street vendors carry arms to prevent entry by federal police. The espacios also include urban youth gangs, gays and lesbians, middle class debtors - both members and not members of El Barzón- - students, prostitutes and evangelicals.

To counteract the unrest, the government has instituted “public security” measures such as wire tapping, surveillance, and the chronic favorite, false accusations coupled with torture. Military circulate in the streets. They bribe children with candy to inform on their parents. In the countryside they maintain arbitrary roadblocks and detain campesinos in the fields. They rape the women to demonstrate their rule, their impunity from punishment.

Beyond the city limits of San Cristóbal, at night we heard random bursts of gunfire. At least, to George’s ear as a World War II veteran, it was small arms fire. When I inquired, we were told the explosions were rockets of a Saint’s Day celebration. It’s perfectly true that rockets for celebration are fired all night. But in Mexico City I wondered if once again we had been falsely soothed. It wouldn’t do, after all, to tell tourists the military were at play in the night. For what purpose? Intimidation of the population. Mexico has the highest ratio of police per capita in the world: twice that of the USA. Of the nation’s thirty-two states, nineteen now employ the military as police. This is another way of saying that the Mexican military occupies Mexico.

In 1996 the Mexican government’s payment for interest on the national debt will be \$18 billion. We were told not to carry visible purses unless we walked in a group, an instruction I more or less ignored, although George’s backpack was stolen from between his feet in the Mexico City airport. We instructed not to wear conspicuous jewelry, which was no problem for me, in my cotton baggy pants. I had pulled out a silk shirt to show I knew I was at home in a big city, but I was no glittering gringa.

By pre-arrangement we had joined a delegation of liberal tourists:

the kind who have decent hearts and always mean well; the kind who contribute to good causes. They came to Mexico City as a Grassroots International delegation destined to seduction into greater contributions. All of us intended to gain some political education.

For example: The 40% increase in the crime rate dovetails with unemployment and poverty. Between October of 1994 and October of 1995, one million workers lost their jobs. In November of 1995, out of a workforce of thirty-six million, eighteen million were unemployed. For those who work in official jobs, Mexicans receive the lowest wages on the continent - less than in El Salvador. One out of three women now work to provide family income but their wages are less than in 1970. Minimum wage, at \$25 pesos per day, buys less than one-third of what it bought in 1980.

As a result, Mexican unions are making common cause with unions in the USA and Canada, against transnational corporations. "If the largest capitalists don't recognize any borders, we shouldn't either. We are organizing transnationals," we were told by a *sindicato* representative. In the USA :

LA IMMIGRANT STRIKERS TARGET MEXICO'S TORTILLA KING (Pacific News Service)

Mexico's Mission Foods moved north and became the world's largest tortilla producer. In the process, the Mexican firm turned on its head the classic NAFTA symbol of the U.S. plant moving south in search of low wages.

Alvarez, like the company's other delivery drivers, routinely puts in 60 to 80 hours a week. Paid piece rate with no overtime, he earns an average of \$180 per week - sometimes as little as \$108.

When Alvarez parked his truck on August 3 and picked up a picket sign, he took on more than a local food processor. Mission Foods is the U.S. arm of a deep pocketed Mexican monopoly with extensive ties to that country's ruling elite, including the current Mexican president and his predecessor. Its largest and newest U.S. plant, in Rancho Cucamonga, will have 50 assembly lines and 1,200 workers when it reaches full production, and will supply tortillas to the U.S. Army, as well as a number of fast food chains, including Pollo Loco, Taco

Bell, Del Taco and Carl's Jr.

"The popular stereotype that tortillas are produced in small storefronts is wrong," says Joel Ochoa, organizing director of the Los Angeles Manufacturing Action Project, which is supporting the strike. Over 25,000 workers nationwide produce \$2.5 billion worth of tortillas each year. They are almost exclusively immigrant workers, in the same economic situation as the drivers. About a fourth of their production is concentrated in southern California, and most of it belongs to Mission Foods.

Mission, a division of Grupo MASECA (or Gruma) belongs to Roberto Gonzalez Barrera, the Mexican tortilla king who amassed a fortune in excess of \$1.1 billion, including banks, brokerage houses and fast food franchises. Gruma has 10 plants across the U.S., and \$400 million in total comes from U.S. tortilla sales.

When it moved into the Los Angeles market, it was already one of the largest food producers in Mexico. Gonzalez grew rich on government tortilla subsidies, and the vast growth of his industrialized tortilla production put thousands of small producers, the *nixtamaleros*, out of business.

Grupo MASECA was rewarded with an illegal payment of \$7 million from the government enterprise CONASUPO, according to the "New York Times", at a time when Mexican President Ernesto Zedillo functioned as its secretary of budget and planning. Gonzalez loaned \$50 million to Raul Salinas, brother of ex president Carlos Salinas de Gortari. Raul Salinas now resides in a Mexican prison, accused of masterminding the assassination of Juan Francisco Ruiz Massieu, a government official who opposed construction of a Gruma plant.

As corruption within the Salinas administration began to unravel after Zedillo took office, Carlos Salinas fled Mexico City aboard Gonzalez Barrera's jet.

Gruma received subsidies in the U.S. as well. Rancho Cucamonga's redevelopment agency gave it over \$400,000 to build a plant in the city. Governor Pete Wilson's administration assembled a team of corporate officials to provide assistance.

But despite its wealth and influence, Mission has good reason to fear labor action in Los Angeles. "Their prime concern obviously is

not money,” says Hector Fernandez, business agent of the drivers’ union, Teamsters Local 63. “It’s about breaking the union before it spreads to workers on the production lines in the plants themselves.” Over 1100 workers walk through the gates of Mission’s two local tortilla plants every day.

The tortilla walkout extends a key battlefield in Southern California, where factories and workplaces have become pressure cookers for immigrant workers. NAFTA induced poverty pushes more and more people north across the border. Proposition 187 and similar anti immigrant measures make them more vulnerable and their labor cheaper. It’s a recipe for a labor war.

Mission Foods drivers like Alvarez are doing what over 20,000 immigrant workers have done in southern California over the last decade — organizing a union and going on strike. The Los Angeles Manufacturing Action Project set up to coordinate these efforts among the city’s 700,000 industrial workers.

“We can all see that the stakes are very high in this strike for the strikers themselves — and for the right of all immigrant workers to organize and live a decent life,” says Ochoa. “If this strike is won, it will make that right real, and easier to achieve, for thousands of others.

We were invited to visit the Mexican Commission for the Defense and Promotion of Human Rights, a non-governmental organization, and three other meetings: that of MCD (Citizens Movement for Democracy), and the MC (Civil Movement) of FAT union representatives.

Mariclaire Acosta, a well-groomed woman who learned English as a child, is President of the Commission. She told us that the office takes security measures, and they fear for their personal safety. Protection of human rights is a constitutionally enshrined goal never observed. After the signing of NAFTA, the Zedilla government took the simpler step of modifying the constitution to curtail both social and individual rights.

“The Mexican political regime is in a class by itself for several reasons, not least among them its resilience and durability. Although

by no means a democracy, it has been quite successful in adopting several policies associated with democratic governments, such as formally guaranteed civil and political rights as well as regular elections and opposition parties. However, in practice, human rights abuse is institutionalized and its perpetrators protected. This abuse is exercised through a complex mixture of co-optation and repression of members of opposition movements.”

Acosta is also the signed author of the Commission’s pamphlet of July 1996 on “The Faces of Racism” . In this document, the term “racism” is placed in a context of Jews in Europe in the 1930s and 40s, the Serbian-Bosnian-Croatian slaughters, the Hutus and Tutsis in Rwanda, the East Timor genocide by the Javanese. None of these genocides correlates with our North American attitude toward “race”, i.e. one “race” against another. In the instance of the Jews and in the case of Serbia, Acosta is referring to “genocides” among “white” people. In the instance of Africa, they are black and in East Timor, Asian. Acosta is using “racism” as it is now used in many parts of the world as synonymous with tribalism, membership of people banded together against all defined non-members, for political, economic or religious supremacy.

And suddenly my view of Senora Gloria’s racism shifted like a kalaidoscope. Her servants aren’t indios at all. They are her servants, living in her home.

Using my own translation, Acosta says:

“The Zapatista rebellion in Chiapas revealed, in an unequivocal form, the profound and unconscionable racism that still impregnates Mexican society. Although it’s known to all Mexicans that we are mestizo and should be proud of our glorious indigenous past, the fact is that the real indios, of flesh and blood, belonging to 56 authentic pueblos who live in our country, go unnoticed by the national institutions, and are subjected to plunder and ridicule on the part of the rest of the population. Remnants of the colonial culture in expressions like the right people to refer to people of white or mixed ancestry in the rural communities, is proof of that [disdain].
...”

I was reading the document with Mariclaire Acosta’s urban

clothes and hair and lifestyle in my mind. She's a handsome woman, who travels world-wide to raise funds for Human Rights in Mexico. The next time I was to see her was in Boston in November. Her good looks were intact. But her self-assured confidence, to my eyes, had given way. "She is afraid now," I said to myself watching her speak. She has acquired a strange tic, a recoil of her head I didn't see in Mexico. It's as if she's hearing the sudden slam of gunfire, sounds I do not hear.

"The Indian people of Mexico find themselves subject to inhumane conditions that keep them marginalized and poor. The towns predominantly indigenous in the country, which approach 30% [of the total number of towns], have an illiteracy rate of 43%, more than three times the national rate. At the same time, the indian people show dramatic levels of unemployment in the cash economy: nearly 60% of those older than twelve years of age cannot find work. 43% of the indigenous people receive incomes less than minimum wage, more than double the national rate, and in these towns almost 30% of the population receive no cash income at all. Health, housing, energy and potable water among the indigenous population amounts to no more than scraps.

If these statistics weren't enough, the rate of political violence against the indian population is the highest in the country. According to Mariclaire Acosta, the mayor of San Cristóbal and others in Chiapas have ties to Lyndon Larouche. Right wing money finds its way into crevices in the civil system as surely as the, at last count, 2,498 private armies - White Guards - find their way "outside the conflict zone" of official military surveillance, where the government tolerates Low Intensity Warfare against mobilized civilians.

Almost 40% of the recommendations put out by the National Commission of Human Rights in regard to serious violations, such as the right to life and physical freedom from harm, have to do with rural conflicts against the indian pueblos."

In November she added to her story the recounting of the kidnapping of a CONPAZ accountant and his wife and children. "Unknown vandals" destroyed a shipment of food and medical supplies stored in the CONPAZ office. Destroyed, not stolen. Acosta

spoke on the telephone to Mexico. “We are talking about famine in Chiapas,” she said. Her head pulled back in that dreadful gesture. The silver ear rings she wore trembled on their chains.

The Zapatista rebellion in January of 1944, tiny and militarily inadequate as it was, wakened recognition among Mexico’s middle-class leaders that Mexico has to reinvent itself in another image. There’s no doubting the sincerity of workers like Mariclaire Acosta. They function while in danger of losing their lives.

But we were out for a special Sunday meal in the Mexico City plaza. Music serenaded the diners. A grand buffet table displayed meat and chicken, rice dishes and bean dishes, vegetables, chilis, wrapped dainties. At the table we drank wine and beer, ate and chatted. We were tourists. Afterwards we went to see the mythic image: bigger than life murals in the national palace, painted by Diego Rivera. Hanging over the balcony railing, we could ignore other tourists and a uniformed palace guard in earnest conversation with his girlfriend. The paintings depict the history of the Spanish conquests, torture and enslavement of the indios, the development of the industrial base and the Mexican revolution. The original Zapatista (Emiliano Zapata) is painted in his sombrero and bandolero: huge, muscular, brown, bigger than life.

Out in front of the palace, all the government buildings were draped in massive green, gold and white banners, anticipating Independence Day celebrations. The usual vendors set up booths to lure tourists with crafts and plastic gadgets, and a group of “indigenous” dancers on the paved square performed in feathers and leg bells, undeterred by a mild rain.

In one corner of the plaza a woman sat on a stone bench, facing the impervious walls of the palace. Between her legs a man knelt on the pavement, speaking words I could not hear. The woman was weeping. They wrapped themselves in the privacy of a public space.

We visited Mexico City’s enormous sprawl of neighborhoods, pockets of economic self-help that took hold as a legal equivalent of

ungovernable spaces. These self-help groups may be union-based or school and health based neighborhood efforts. They include day care centers and food shops. The abastos, government supplied distribution centers for commodities, similar to what the US government did up until the 1970s' conversion to food stamps, have been reduced almost to nonexistence. But where they survive, they are run and managed as local neighborhood providers, selling at reduced prices.

Once again we sat in the sun. Now we are outside the day care rooms of a local Mexico City organization. The day-care center has a minimal but usable kitchen, a nurse's office, and the walled courtyard so prevalent in Mexico, where children can safely play. The center is a cooperative effort, shabby by American standards, but quietly determined to survive beneath the clang of massive church bells above its walls. In the sunshine we listened to young people describe their efforts to organize their colonia. It was like hearing a youth corps group, but these youth are so determined, so serious. Each one recited for us their accomplishments.

We strolled through the streets. We went into an abasto and gratefully bought juice and water. Street vendors on the corners in this neighborhood sell cheap manufactured clothing and hair decorations. On the Sunday streets I miss the brilliant blouses and hair ribbons like butterflies perched on the braids of indigenous women. Here, indios are invisible in the mestizo mix. The most recognizable costume is that of the little girls exiting communion dressed in wide ruffled satin dresses, like the royal Spanish Infantas in paintings by Francisco Goya.

In the past six years the number of human rights organizations in Mexico grew from 17 to 250. At latest count there are 2,498 illegal private police forces, called White Guards.

The constitution was changed to finally allow the Mexico City, FD (Federal Distrito, analogous to Washington, DC) citizens to elect their own mayor and representatives. The foremost candidate is a PRIista.

On our final day we visited the office of Frente Autonomia Tra-

bajo (FAT) to hear how the various projects were going. We joined a group upstairs in a building with high windows, in a room so filled with light that we were dazzled. George went to close one of the windows against the street noise, and for a moment swung out on the casement like a precipitous angel on the verge of disaster. The presenters were women...lunch consisted of their "best" beans and rice served on paper plates, soda and a special desert treat I managed to choke down behind a smile.

Voting in Mexico is an arduous process not imaginable to citizens of the USA. First, a voter must travel to a polling place, often many miles away. Often they arrive on foot. Ballots are marked by hand, and once deposited in a ballot box the voter - or concerned observer - watches continuously to ensure that the boxes are not tampered with. The counting process requires weeks of more watching. Fraud is rampant.

Everything continues. As it was, it is, only more so. 2014 incomprehensible. I love big cities. However, even those of us born to a city, even those more intrepid than I, may feel intimidated by the vastness of the federal district, whose organization depends on an ant-like establishment of trails. Beyond that communicative instinct, I cannot comprehend more.