

Review of: Lorenzo Meyer. *Distopía Mexicana: Perspectivas para una nueva transición* [Mexican Dystopia: Perspectives for a New Transition]. México: Penguin Random House, 2016, Kindle edition. ISBN: 978-607-314-361-5

Irish Journal of Sociology, First Published July 22, 2018

<http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0791603518789987>

Rubén Flores

Lorenzo Meyer is one of Mexico's most thoughtful social commentators and public intellectuals. For many decades, his writing has shed much-needed light on the country's recent historical transformations. His work combines historical depth, a vast knowledge of social and political theory, and a remarkable skill to present complex problems in ways that are understandable to wider publics. In this book, Meyer charts the key features of Mexico's current historical moment, as well as its origins.

As the book's title suggests, this is a moment of deep crisis in many areas of the country's social life. Terms like "crisis", however, can only begin to point at a tragic reality whose essence Meyer approximates by paraphrasing Shakespeare: "Something is rotten in Mexico".<sup>1</sup> Throughout the book's 12 chapters, Meyer examines different aspects of a reality marked by widespread social suffering. This scenario of social catastrophe is perhaps best illustrated by the climate of gruesome violence and generalized impunity that has caused a collapse of trust in the state as a guarantor of public order and security, let alone the rule of law. Between 2006 and 2016 (the first decade of the "War on Drugs" launched by then president Felipe Calderón), around 150,000 people died violently, while 30,000 were reported as disappeared (Gómez Romero, 2016) — a cycle of violence that, in the words of Catholic priest and human rights activist Alejandro Solalinde, has turned Mexico into a "clandestine grave". Meyer highlights the important role that state actors, often in collusion with organized crime, have played in this dark chapter of the country's recent history—as well as the long history of state violence in Mexico. For it is not only the case that the state has lost the monopoly of violence in some regions, but rather that many branches of the state are deeply involved in human rights violations, notably in the form of extrajudicial killings, torture and enforced disappearances.

---

<sup>1</sup> Meyer's actual phrasing is: "something is rotten in Guerrero", the Mexican state where 43 students were forcibly disappeared in 2014; however, Meyer makes it clear that his reference to Hamlet applies to the whole country.

Meyer places this human rights catastrophe in a wider economic and political context marked by the absence of a national project. In turn, he links this absence to a political elite that has been, by and large, well below the demands of the times, and which has shown much more interest in advancing personal and group interests than in serving the public good (Chapter 6. The political class). In the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, Mexico's political elites abandoned the nationalist project that guided the country after the Mexican Revolution, and embraced neoliberal reform. Meyer argues that linking Mexico's economy to the US market via the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994 epitomized this transition, a move that increased Mexico's already huge and complex dependence on its northern neighbour yet without creating a vibrant new economy. Under neoliberalism, Meyer points out, Mexico's economic growth has been paltry (2.5% between 1994 and 2013), while economic inequality has increased in tandem with the precarisation of labour conditions. The upshot has been an economic arrangement that has left behind the vast majority of the population, while accentuating what Meyer identifies as the main contradiction of Mexico's social body: the huge social distance between the haves and the have-nots.

Chapter 5 is devoted to the country's "transition" to democracy, a term for which the use of quotation marks is amply justified. The year 2000 saw the end of more than 70 years of one-party rule when opposition candidate Vicente Fox ousted the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) from the presidency. The great expectations that this event gave rise to — that the country was in the process of becoming a democracy — were quickly dashed, however. The government of the conservative Partido Acción Nacional (PAN) embraced rather than dismantled the corporatist practices of its predecessors. It also undermined the democratic process itself in the 2006 elections by seeking to illegally prevent the main opposition presidential candidate from running, and then engaging in what was widely perceived as electoral fraud. The 2012 elections, also rife with scandals connected to vote-buying with public funds, saw the return of the old PRI. Meyer's diagnosis is that Mexico's political regime is at best a hybrid that combines democratic elements and authoritarian ones, the democratic transition having been distorted by powerful vested interests. While he recognizes that there has been progress in many areas connected with democratisation, for example regarding the vibrancy of civil society, he also alerts us to the many obstacles that a "new transition" would have to overcome in order to truly move the country beyond its authoritarian past. For example, Meyer examines the huge gap that exists between the established parties and a population that does not feel represented by them, and that has come to feel disenchanted with the idea of democracy, as well as the formidable obstacles to freedom of expression that exist in the country. (Reporters

Without Borders' 2018 World Press Freedom Index ranked Mexico 147, between Bangladesh (146) and Russia (148)).

Is Mexico a lost cause? Meyer would like to think not. His grim diagnosis is the prelude to an invitation to think of better alternatives to the current status quo and the eventual formation of a new national project, a new Mexican utopia. Hence the book's subtitle ("Perspectives for a New Transition"). For Meyer, under the current political constellation, one of the few political forces able to stir the country away from the abyss is the recently formed political party/movement Movimiento Regeneración Nacional (MORENA [Movement for National Renewal]) and its leader, the three-time presidential candidate Andrés Manuel López Obrador (Chapter 8). Still, a huge question remains: what could turn collective egoism into solidarity? Meyer believes that, alongside MORENA, social movements such as YoSoy132 — a student movement formed during the 2012 presidential elections to protest the cosy relationship between big media and the PRI — have an important role to play. Not long after the book's publication, nature showed another source of solidarity. In 2017, the country's South and capital were badly damaged by a number of earthquakes. For all the suffering they inflicted, these calamities also showed Mexican civil society at its best, as people from all walks of life, but especially the young, mobilised generously in help of strangers, thus opening a window of hope. As Meyer himself noted in the earthquakes' aftermath, citing the work on altruism and volunteering by sociologist Gustavo Verduzco, this solidarity was already there, but (as in much of the world) had far too long remained invisible (Meyer, 2017).

Throughout the book, Meyer makes a number of thought-provoking references to theories in the social sciences in order to advance his arguments. For example, in chapter 10, we find references to Norbert Elias' process of civilisation, and how Elias' writings may relate to Mexican reality. These theoretical insights could have been strengthened if the author had drawn on the literature on social suffering, which would seem particularly helpful to illuminate many of the tragic realities of today's Mexico. Likewise, the book could have paid more attention to the gender dimensions of the social processes under examination, especially since women bear the brunt of much "structural" and physical violence; witness the feminicides that have shaken different parts of the country. Other aspects to which the book could have devoted more attention include the plight of refugees and migrants from Central America, and the violence against journalists and human rights defenders (see Amnesty International, w/d). And, as Meyer himself has stated, much has happened since the book was written in 2016, and so a new edition would surely need to cover topics such as the Trump's administration and the 2018 Mexican elections. In any case, *Distopia Mexicana* will be a helpful reference for anybody interested in Mexico's recent history and the

country's prospects. Translations of this and other books by this prolific author into English and other languages would be a welcome development.

## References

Amnesty International (w/d) Mexico 2017/2018. Available at: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/americas/mexico/report-mexico/> (accessed: 12 June 2018).

González Romero L (2016) A decade of murder and grief: Mexico's drug war turns ten. *The Conversation*, 11 December. Available at: <https://theconversation.com/a-decade-of-murder-and-grief-mexicos-drug-war-turns-ten-70036> (accessed: 12 June 2018).

Meyer L (2017) La raíz de la solidaridad. *Reforma*, 5 October.

Reporters Without Borders (2018) 2018 World Press Freedom Index. Available at: <https://rsf.org/en/ranking> (accessed: 12 June 2018).