

Interview

A historian looks at the current situation – and takes aim at the system

'Exporting our misery'

Mexico is undergoing rapid population growth while simultaneously becoming an urbanized country. The country's economic crisis has led the government to seek structural changes in its economy. Meanwhile, in and out of government more people are calling for increased democracy. Mexico Journal reporter Walter Gaddis met with Colegio de Mexico political science professor Lorenzo Meyer to discuss these and other changes in Mexico. Excerpts:

As a historian, what do you think have been the most significant changes Mexico has undergone since 1968?

What is not taking place are the changes in the political system to adapt to a new Mexico.

You have urged the government to go forward with reforms to allow greater participation by opposition parties in political life. What do you think will be the consequences if this is not done?

The fact that Mexico is becoming, for better or worse, an urban society means that people are more educated and more aware of differences between Mexico and other societies. The problem of participation in a formal democracy is becoming increasingly relevant to many people, especially the middle and upper classes. But I think at some point it will also become important to the working class.

We are now in a moment of crucial importance. If democracy is not accepted as a real alternative by the people leading this political system, the future will not bring more of what we now have because the present way of doing politics is exhausted.

Hasn't there been an attempt to adapt by opening up the system more to opposition parties?

The political reforms have really been a way of co-opting some elements of the opposition while keeping the dominant role of the official party and the powers of the presidency, which is the strongest political institution, as unchanged as possible.

Reforms up to now have been one way – a very intelligent way – of maintaining the authoritarian nature of the system.

Do you think either the rightist or leftist parties are capable of capturing

'The rhetoric of all public officials – from the lowest levels to the presidency – has misused millions of times the idea of the Revolution'

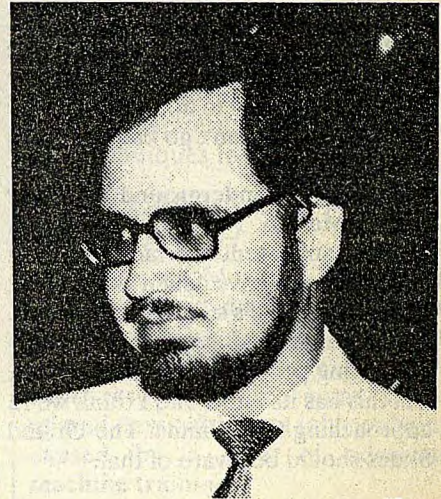
the public imagination?

Unfortunately, I think the rightist parties have shown themselves more capable of doing that. One thing that we often don't like to admit in public is that there is a conservative culture at the center of the Mexicans' perception of themselves and of the world. So it is easier for the right to speak a language that can be understood by those who

are aware of an alternative.

The left has not been able to find the right issues and language. The so-called "objective" conditions are here that should allow the left to flourish: high prices, social injustice, lack of government legitimacy. But you don't see the left getting stronger or bolder and the slogans of the left – social justice, agrarian reform, unionization – were taken by the government.

The left is still marginal, still living in universities, in isolated areas. It hasn't been able to penetrate the core of the Mexican view of the world. It isn't viewed by many as a real alternative.



Lorenzo Meyer

You have written that the government has lost its legitimacy as the embodiment of the ideals of the 1910 revolution. Do you think it is capable of reforming to regain that legitimacy?

Yes and no. The rhetoric of all public officials – from the lowest levels to the

presidency – has misused millions of times the idea of the revolution. I think it's time to find another political discourse, another way of looking at Mexico.

Of course it can regain legitimacy. In the past, the main source of legitimacy was economic efficacy. Regaining the way Mexico was able to grow in the 1950s, 60s, even 70s, would be one way of meeting some of the demands of the population. Economic performance is therefore a key to whether the government can regain legitimacy.

How do you view the current economic situation?

Mexico and other underdeveloped countries are going through a recession that has no precedent in the 20th century. For us this is worse than the depression of the 1930s. The Great Depression was nothing for Mexico in comparison with what we're going through right now. This is the real one.

The single most important issue is the foreign debt. We have to pay 9 or 10 billion dollars a year just in interest on the debt. And the debt is increasing. It's bigger every year. There's no logic in this! It's like a poor family paying more than what it earns. It's impossible.

They can save. They can eat less. But at some point they're going to starve. Or they're going to say, "To hell with this, I won't pay any longer and now what are you going to do? Kill us? Send us to jail?" You can't go bankrupt like a company.

We have an underground economy here in Mexico. That helps to explain to a certain extent the fact that even though wages have fallen 40 percent since 1982, there's still no social revolt. The underground economy is somehow giving people a chance to survive. But this has its limits and I think we're approaching those limits. The United States should be aware of that.

How effective do you think Mexico's efforts will be to promote development through exports?

In the press we're now receiving a lot of information about non-petroleum Mexican exports. Because of the revaluation of the yen, the problems of the dollar and our devaluation of the peso, these exports are becoming

viewed as very attractive in foreign markets.

I wonder if we can base our export policies on cheap labor. But at least for now that is the way to export. It's using the hardships of Mexico to promote exports. It's a little like exporting our

'The reason poor countries are producing drugs is because they're poor'

misery.

Do you think the North will grow as a center of economic and political power?

Under the new economy, the North's links with the United States are going to be greater. This may lead to the North trying to be relatively independent of the rest of society.

But political power does not necessarily come with greater economic power. We are experts at inconsistencies in Mexico. Look at what happened to the banking community, the center of the Mexican bourgeoisie. They were extremely powerful, yet the banking system was expropriated without any resistance. They were killed as bankers overnight.

What should the United States do to help Mexico overcome its problems?

The main interest of the United States

in Mexico is stability. It's not, as some people used to say, economic penetration or imperialism. I suppose what's worrying American leaders now is the possibility of breakdown in the political system. If I were in charge of Washington's policies, I would try to help Mexico overcome its economic crisis.

But that's so difficult because there are so many contradictory interests in Washington. Some of these are bound to be obstacles. For example, there are senators and representatives trying to win votes by attacking Mexico as a country introducing drugs into the United States. It's an easy way to win votes: being hard and moralistic with the neighbor. But these people are not facing the fact that the reason poor countries are producing drugs is because they're poor. For a lot of peasants it's more logical to produce marijuana or other drugs than any other commodity being sold in the international market.

One way of getting Mexico moving again economically would be to open up the [U.S.] market. But again there are interests that oppose the entry of, say, Mexican fruits and vegetables.

It's so complex a situation that it will be hard for the United States to have a coherent policy to help Mexico surmount its crisis. Although you'll find that every single responsible leader in the United States knows his or her main interest is to keep Mexico quiet, to not see another breakdown of the political system because the consequences would be felt immediately in the United States.

**Be a subscriber.
Be entertained.
Be informed.**

MEXICO Journal

Call 521-9241