A Conversation with Lorenzo Meyer about Mexico's Political Transition: From Authoritarianism to What?

Lorenzo Meyer was interviewed in his office at El Colegio de México in April 1998. I edited a transcript of the interview and invited him to make changes and corrections in September 1998. He returned a lightly edited text in January 1999.

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LORENZO MEYER: My view of Mexican history is that we are living at the end of a long historical period that started at the beginning of the century with the Mexican Revolution, and this is the end. It's a long cycle that has taken the whole twentieth century. We have been living "in the shadow of the Mexican Revolution." That's the title of a book that Hector Aguilar Camin and I wrote.[1] And now we are coming out of that shadow. In looking back at the nineteenth century, we can see that the turning points of that past century were independence, the establishment of a liberal political system, and the Mexican Revolution. These three moments of change developed through very traumatic struggles. It was a catastrophic way of changing. Perhaps this time, the fourth time, Mexico, as a whole, will change *without* experiencing the suffering, the destruction, of the other three periods that I have just mentioned.

I think that we have now a good chance of going from authoritarianism to something that I hope is going to be democracy without the traumatic experience of the past—without repeating ourselves.

Of course, we already have had violence and economic disasters, which have again produced suffering and destruction, but not at the level of the Mexican Revolution, the civil war of the nineteenth century, or the war of independence. So that's my first reaction to the question: Where are we at this moment in looking back at history? It's the end of our regime. That's the basic nature of this moment. We are

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[1] Hector Aguilar and Lorenzo Meyer, *In the Shadow of the Mexican Revolution: Contemporary American History, 1910–1989* (Austin, 1993).

changing the political system as well as the economic one. In the case of economics, we were forced by the outside to change the way in which the Mexican economy had been functioning for about forty years of systematic growth; we reached a quite dramatic moment in which the whole model based on the internal market and on protectionism, on industrialization based only on domestic consumption, was obviously unable to carry Mexico to the twenty-first century. That model had a very weak economic basis.

And then, almost from one day to the next, the decision was taken at the highest level—that means the presidency—to reshape Mexico, and it produced a lot of hardship in Mexican society, but globalization was finally overtaking Mexico. The way in which this happened was through the use to the fullest of the authoritarian instruments at the disposal of the president, Carlos Salinas. He used the most traditional instruments of Mexican politics to modernize Mexican economics. He used an array of authoritarian instruments to introduce liberalism, neoliberalism, market economics, to Mexico. But then the system had to pay a price. At some point the Mexican president said to the outside as well as to the Mexican public, we are not going to repeat the experience of the Soviet Union. He was not going to be Mikhail Gorbachev, not going to have a political opening and an economic disaster. Implicit in this view was the opposite: I'm *going* to keep the traditional system and produce almost a miracle in economic terms. And for a brief, shining moment, Mexico was viewed as a success story, a miracle; an underdeveloped, marginal country introduced an economic revolution and came out of it successful and proud. And at the end, that was not the case.

The political capital expended by Salinas and his modernizers was too much. And Mexican society began to ask for something else, because economic modernization brought polarization in social terms. The few successful entrepreneurs became *very* successful indeed. Wealth was concentrated even more than in the past, and Mexico had been a very unjust society in terms of income distribution. At the end, the gap between the rich and poor became even wider. The success stories of the few have as a counterpart the nonsuccess stories of the many. And the tension was so strong that Salinas, at the end of his presidency, had to accept things that were the equivalent of the beginning of a political revolution. He had to accept, for example, that there would be an independent authority to overview the whole electoral process and that elections had to be real. A real opposition had to take part in the process, but under different rules from the past, less one-sided, less unilateral. The electoral dice could no longer remain loaded against challengers to the incumbents.

So 1994 was the moment when this dream of rapid economic change and political stability ended. Political instability became the most striking reality of Mexico: the assassination of the presidential candidate of the state party, the assassination of the secretary general of that party, and, this is small in terms of people involved but extremely important, the explosion of violence in Chiapas, the Zapatista rebellion. All these things produce a new political environment, the sense that something is ending, is finishing, that the functionality of the authoritarian system is ending, has been eroded, and that something else has to take its place. So after the economic transfor-

mation, and as part of that transformation, now we are experiencing political change. But at this very moment, 1998, we still don't know how the change is going to take place. Probably, the next presidential election, of the year 2000, will be the moment in which we are going to end our present way of doing politics and inaugurate another. We are going to enter the new century with a different, untested political system.

For many Mexicans that is going to be viewed as an extremely positive development. However, there is a danger there; the danger is that society is now more divided, and the social cleavages are more obvious than in the past. And no one knows how a new political system—which we are all hoping is going to be democratic—how it's possible for that system to answer the demands of the average Mexican citizen. I don't see how it can, because in the new system the demands are going to be voiced more openly than in the past. The electorate is going to demand results, but there are no resources for answering that demand in a positive way. So, there is something dangerous right now that can produce negative results just at the beginning of the new century. We are going into unknown territory.

Of course other societies have made that transition. I'm thinking, for example, in Spain. But when Spain transformed itself in the 1970s, the economic basis of that society was more or less a good one. The economy was going up. Economic development was evident in Spain at that moment. Economic development was the oil that made changes in the political machine easier.

In Mexico, the oil of rapid economic development is no longer available. So the clash between classes, regions, and vested interests is going to be more direct, and the state is so weak that its arbiter power among these different and conflicted interests is less now than it used to be.

DAVID THELEN: Did the PRI (Partido Revolucionario Institucional) used to perform some social functions that people will expect even as the regime becomes less authoritarian?

LM: The clientalistic tradition contained practices that are going to continue into the future, but the problem is that the resources that make clientalistic relationships work are no longer there. In the past, an all-powerful presidency was able to give something to the workers and at the same time accept many of the demands of the industrialists and the proprietors, the capitalist class. In the past, the president was able to give something to the peasants and at the same time protect the landowners, to give something to those that are living at the margin of the great cities and at the same time answer in a positive way the demands of the urban middle class. So the contradictions were not solved but managed through the resources of the state. But, in the new economic system, the state doesn't have the resources. Now the market is managing the majority of those resources. And the logic of the market is not exactly the same as that of politics—market allocates resources according to productivity, not loyalty. And I don't know if this clientalistic tradition can continue, not because of moral or philosophical reasons but for very practical reasons, because there is no money available for carrying clientalism into the twenty-first century.

DT: A market defender would say that the market will encourage more growth, that

there's not a finite amount of money, that investment will prompt consumption, which will prompt more investment, and the market itself will be able to solve this.

LM: That is, in theory, the idea. But let us assume that this is going to happen. It takes time. And in this equation time is extremely important, because a poor country like Mexico is forced to wait in order first to concentrate, then to produce, and then to distribute. The distributive part of this process cannot take place in the near future. But political demands are already there because economic crisis started in Mexico in 1982. So we have lived already through sixteen years of economic crisis, and the market economics are just beginning. The, in theory, positive results cannot be expected in fewer than ten or fifteen years from now. But that's a long time in political terms. So time is a problem. And suppression in order to gain time can produce a strong reaction, especially if at the end the market does not deliver the results it promised. But we are looking right now at an economy that can function without integrating 30 or 40 percent of the labor force. And it's not the problem of Mexico only, but of all Latin America. It is a very peculiar situation in which the modern part of the economy can be very vigorous and successful, while leaving aside a lot of people. But the new political system cannot leave aside anybody, because that's the essence of the new political system. The marginal, the poor, are going to be the clientele of some political party, and they are going to be very angry. The economics can just forget about many people in Mexico or even in the United States, but politics, in a democratic political system, cannot. So how are we going to confront that problem? In the best of all possible scenarios, in ten or fifteen years the accumulation of capital will give way to the distribution of benefits. It's a long time. What in the model can prosper while it leaves islands of poverty and marginality? The only solution to marginality and the leftovers of the system is not the invisible hand of the market, but the very visible hand of the government. But in a poor country the government doesn't have the resources. Even if it is willing—and that I wonder about, especially in a global context—the government cannot play under different rules from the big centers of power. If the United States is not playing the game of domestic redistribution but is focusing only on the cold logic of economics, the peripheral areas, like Mexico, cannot play a different game even if they want to, because if they try they will lose in the global economy. They have to be more brutal even than the centers of power. It is like a marathon. The United States is in front, and the rules of that marathon are written by the United States. If you said, "No. Wait. Wait. I am not going to play with those rules," then you have to go out of the race, but what is life out of that race? It's an impossibility right now. Perhaps in the past when you played with different models you could say socialism, capitalism, fascism, there were several possibilities. But now, when Francis Fukuyama proposes this is the end of history, there is no alternative.[2] It's the cold and dark life outside of the race. You have to keep running under the rules of the big guy who is at the head of the group.

DT: How would you, as a leading historian of United States–Mexican relations,

[2] Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York, 1992).

trace how and why the United States has affected Mexico's development? Particularly, how has the United States supported political authoritarianism in Mexico?

LM: The United States is right now preoccupied with the United States. It's perhaps the destiny of all big powers. They look at themselves most of the time; just from time to time, they look outside, and they look at the big competitors and the big problems outside. They don't have the time or the disposition to look at small countries and political systems like Mexico, unless they are forced to by geographical considerations. That's the only way we can explain the little bit of attention on the part of the United States to Mexico—geography, nothing else.

In the nineteenth century, this geographical destiny forced the United States to look at Mexico in a zero-sum game. When one wins, the other loses. That means land. It's a territorial game. The United States needed and wanted more land to expand, to build the necessary geographical basis for development. Mexico was there. So the only interest for the United States in regard to Mexico was, how much land are we going to occupy? How much land is there empty, or more or less empty, and, most important, how much land was the North willing to tolerate as an expansion of the South?

Then, in the second half of the nineteenth century, Americans began looking at Mexico as a secondary market after the railroad was built in the United States. It was a natural extension of the United States railroads to go into Mexico. It was natural, if you were extracting oil from Texas, to extract from Mexico in the areas of the Gulf of Mexico, Veracruz, Tamaulipas.

At the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, the third element is introduced into this picture, and that is that is that there is now no empty land between the two countries. The societies are close, if not together, for the first time in history. There were cities in which Mexicans on the one side of the border and Americans on the other lived and worked together every day. Those cities, Tijuana and San Ysidro, for example, are single urban structures. The beginning of this lively border of the United States and Mexico forced the authorities in Washington to view Mexico with different eyes. Now stability was perhaps the most important element, because the neighbors were there, and to have a messy, untidy neighbor produced internal negative effects in the United States (pollution, undocumented workers, drugs). So the United States was interested in stability, therefore in the internal politics of Mexico, more than in any other Latin American country. And just precisely at that time, 1910–1917, the Mexican Revolution takes place. So when the United States was becoming a world power, a revolution takes place in Mexico. The United States was almost by default involved in Mexico's internal struggle, although Mexico was small, and events there were complicated enough for the United States not to be able to control what was happening. At the same time, Mexico was not entirely free to do what the revolution wanted to do. There were some constraints, but looking back, there were very few, because there was no anticommunism at that moment. The revolution could develop without any concerns about communism going on. It was a very rare moment in twentieth-century history: a revolution could develop just next door to the United States, and the great

power as yet did not fear a negative doctrine like communism having effects in the United States. Nevertheless, Washington was looking at Mexico and making some moves, inducing the Mexican Revolution one way and inhibiting it in another way. By the end of the 1920s, Washington and Mexico City were able to reach an agreement, an informal agreement but a real one, between President Plutarco Elias Calles and President Calvin Coolidge, with a little help from Ambassador Dwight Morrow. And the basic agreement was so simple and so important. The new regime was already strong enough to be responsible for what was happening in Mexico, and the United States was going to make the new elite accountable for something extremely important: stability. On the other hand, the United States was going to give support to the new regime despite its undemocratic nature. There was a little bit of a contradiction there between the philosophical ideas that are at the basis of the United States political system, democracy, and the fact that the neighbor was not democratic. But it was solved in a very easy way. The United States said that Mexico was a democracy, a peculiar democracy. It had elections. It had political parties. That the elections were meaningless, well, that was just an accident. That there was a state party, well, nobody's perfect, but there were always some small parties there so that if you wanted to see democracy, you could see democracy.

But because the new regime from the 1920s and 1930s had social bases that were absent in the rest of Latin America, it was a really strong political system in relative terms.

DT: Social bases, meaning?

LM: The land reform gave the new regime the support of the peasantry, and organized labor became part of the regime. So peasants and workers were the clientele of the state party. Nobody else was going to mess with peasants and workers. And the middle class was so small, reluctant to go into this arrangement, but little by little, the middle class was conquered also. And the capitalist classes, at the end, found a gold mine in the new regime, because a very active state was also the source of public works. The big concentrations of money in Mexico in the 1940s and 1950s were all linked to the government, through contracts and through protectionism. So from a certain perspective everybody was part of the regime and everybody was happy. So the United States saw in Mexico a model, to a certain extent: a system that was not clashing with its society and for that reason could produce results, stability. And I think that that's the reason why the Mexican political elite in those years received, in exchange for its efficiency in keeping control of Mexican society, a certain amount of freedom and relative independence. The United States was not telling them who was going to be the next president, who was going to be in charge of the Banco de Mexico, or what they had to do in economic terms. In fact, Mexico after World War II had no agreement with the United States Defense Department. In spite of advisers from the United States, Mexico was able to create a set of trade barriers that really left the internal market only for those enterprises, Mexican or foreign, that were producing in Mexico. Trade was very political. There was nothing like free trade. But the United States was not promoting it then. So the influence in political

terms of the United States on Mexico is that it became one of the bases of the authoritarian regime in Mexico. As important as the peasants, CNC (Confederación Nacional Campesina), or the workers of CTM (Confederación de Trabajadores de Mexico), was the United States. It was another partner. It was the invisible member of the system.

Who co-opted whom? The Mexican elite was co-opted by the United States. Or the United States was co-opted by the Mexican elite. I think that both things happened in different ways. When the oil expropriation took place in 1938, for example, Mexico had to confront pressures but not the whole power of the United States to reverse that policy that affected some United States interests and the basic philosophy of property rights of the United States. In the 1970s Luis Echeverria produced a lot of noise and appointed himself leader of the Third World; the United States government was unhappy, but, in the end, it did nothing serious to neutralize Echeverria.

Previous to that, when Adolfo López Mateos kept formal relationships with Cuba, with Fidel Castro's Cuba, the United States was not pleased but accepted the fact. In 1982, when José Lopez Portillo went to Nicaragua and praised the Sandinista revolution and became a victim of his own mismanagement of the oil economy, the United States was willing to give important economic support to Lopez Portillo, as it had to Echeverria in 1976. That's why when the elections of 1988 took place, the United States was willing not to see fraud and the unorthodox ways in which the PRI remained in power, because by that time, the United States saw no alternative. There was only the PRI and the president and nothing else. To have supported movements for Mexican democracy could have meant destruction of the Mexican political system and its economy, something unacceptable because it could produce internal negative results in the United States.

My view is it's just now that Washington and many other political actors and observers in the United States are willing to say, "Perhaps we cannot save the old system in Mexico. And it's better to start thinking of a regime change." And, in that sense, perhaps right now the United States is, for the first time since Woodrow Wilson, a force that can support change in Mexico—well, not support, tolerate. When I say change, it's political change. The United States is no longer an obstacle.

In the first visit of Bill Clinton to Mexico, a small gesture took place. Clinton met with the leadership of the opposition parties, PAN (Partido Acción Nacional) and PRD (Partido de la Revolución Democrática)—something unthinkable just a few years before. The message was that these two opposition parties were legitimate political actors in the Mexican system, a small step in the right direction but with a big meaning. So, that's where we are now in United States–Mexican relations.

Now, what about the nonpolitical side of this—the social and economic migration and drugs? These are the two items on the agenda that are more important than any other. In regard to migration, I think that Mexico can do almost nothing. It's beyond the power of any group, any government, or any force in Mexico to stop migration, because the economy cannot absorb the young Mexicans coming into the labor force. If the United States wants stability in Mexico, it has to accept immigration as a safety valve in Mexico.

But even though that can be rationalized by people in Washington, it seems that this is unacceptable to many common people in the United States. They don't care about safety valves. They look at the world in a more personal way. This problem cannot be solved; perhaps it can be managed, but not solved. Mexico cannot stop sending people to the United States, and right now American society cannot accept that. And both governments, the United States and the Mexican, are caught in the middle without any answer.

The other problem is drug traffic. Again, as long as the market is asking for drugs, the problem will remain. It's impossible for Mexico to eradicate drug production or not to play the role of intermediary between Columbia and the American market. That was so obvious in the past. If you put 10,000 peasants in jail, a new 10,000 peasants will replace them in the poppy fields. Are you going to send those 10,000 again to jail? Another 10,000 or 20,000 or 30,000 or 40,000 will take their place. For all practical purposes, the reserve army of peasants willing to produce poppies is unlimited.

But now there is an even more troublesome situation. The drug traffickers have reached a level of organization that matches that of the Mexican government. And it's not the peasants, the producers; it's the organizers, it's the mafias. At some point, the United States said, "Well, if the police are unable to stop it, send the army." That was a very stupid idea. Because if you start with a very corrupt police force and send in the army, then you end up with a very corrupt army at the end *and* the very corrupt police force. There is no way to stop corruption, especially at this moment in which the system is just becoming more degraded at all levels. The transition is not a sudden and clearly defined transition, but it is a process of degradation. It's the ideal moment for people with lots of money and no moral limit to colonize those structures that are supposed to fight drug traffic. And I don't see a solution to this. I think that if drugs are a problem in the United States because of consumption, drugs are a problem in Mexico, not because of consumption, but because they are feeding on something that was already here, that is, corruption, and making corruption even more important. And that is a danger to a healthy political life. We can transform ourselves from narco-authoritarian into a narco-democracy. And that's so obvious from looking at the problem from Mexico City. I suppose it is more obvious if you look at it from Guadalajara or Sinaloa or Ciudad Juarez. I don't see a solution there.

DT: Can you explain that a little more?

LM: If you live in those towns, like Ciudad Juarez, it's obvious who is in charge of the show. It's not the federal police or the governor but those guys that can make a display of their impunity in downtown Ciudad Juarez, and nobody there is to challenge them.

The solution in the long run to the migration problem is the democratic control that is already taking place in Mexico, no doubt about it, but that takes time and economic development. That's more difficult. The solution to the drug problem, a drug problem that was created by the Western powers, England forcing Chinese people to become addicts and to cultivate poppies, well, the United States wanted

Mexico to cultivate poppies during World War II. They didn't want to produce poppies in the United States because they had some reservations about the morality of it. But the Mexicans could produce it, of course. Now it's not the United States army, it's a very peculiar army demanding that. So the solution, the final solution, if we can use that term here, is a cultural change in the United States that somehow that society would decide not to use drugs, not to invest such an amount of money in that illegal consumption, but I'm unable to imagine how the United States can change. The United States is changing some, in so many ways, in so many times, that perhaps they will change. The majority of Americans don't need cocaine or marijuana or designer drugs, but the United States is such a huge society and so rich that even if a small segment continues to demand drugs, Mexico will remain the place where this demand can find the product and, in the process, create a special interest group, a very powerful one, illegal, that is like a cancer in the body of Mexican society as well as Mexican politics.

I see the problem from a different perspective from the United States. I see Mexico really in this field as a victim, as the United States sees themselves as victims of those bastards out there that are sending this nasty thing to the young people in the United States. Both look at the opposite as the source of the problem, and both see themselves as victims. I don't know what's going to happen or what the answer for this is.

DT: The last time we were here, you said that the United States has a particular responsibility for ending Mexican authoritarianism. What exactly should the United States do now to take responsibility?

LM: In the past, the United States put above everything else the capacity of the authoritarian system to control Mexico. It was not unlike the relationship between the United States and Fulgencio Batista in Cuba, in the past, or the United States and Augusto Pinochet in Chile for a while. The last time we were discussing Spain as a counterexample. When the European powers said, "Well, O.K., perhaps we are going to unite, if we are going to have a common market, we are going to have many things in common. But you, Spain, have to change your political system *first.* Then you will be members of our very exclusive organization, club." But the United States, when Mr. George Bush was in charge, sent exactly the opposite message to Mexico. He said, "We are going to accept you as partners in the free trade agreement, because we don't want you to change." Look at the difference between Europeans and Americans with regard to authoritarian systems. Europeans used anticommunists for a time, but after a while they said, "It's time for you to change." In the United States–Mexico case, it seems that the message was, "Don't change, because we don't have an answer to a new system. You will produce more problems than anything for us if you change. So don't change. And what happens to you internally? It's your business. We don't care if it's antidemocratic. But if in order to bring democracy you are going to introduce new problems and those problems are going to affect us, the United States, you'd better remain authoritarian." That was obviously never said, but the signals were in that direction.

DT: Would you like to see the president or the secretary of state come up with a list of human rights violations by the Mexican government?

LM: No, but what I would like to see is a United States president or a secretary of state who is not so enthusiastic about the Mexican president as they were in the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s, 1980s, when they were so willing to say, time and again, "You are right. As long as order is kept, by whatever means, it is all right. Better be quiet." The way in which the United States legitimized the Mexican system was a little bit shameful but quite understandable from the point of view of the United States. If the goal is not democracy, but stability, and the Mexican elite doesn't trust its own society, because of history, I don't want to say because of race or a racist element, but I suppose that something of that could have been also an element, implicitly, then the United States follows the same logic and does not expect a democratic system south of the border. Democracy is too complex. It needs a kind of moral fiber that, from the point of view of leaders north and south of the Rio Grande, Mexicans do not have. And if they try, they are going to fail and are going to produce instability at a border that is not Mexican alone but also American. So that's my view.

DT: What kind of alternatives, somewhere between social base and political program, do you see possibly emerging here?

LM: The United States is the model, and nobody is debating an alternative to that, such as the European example of parliamentary democracy. The farthest we are looking in terms of alternatives is not at the political system itself, but what to do with that political system, what kind of welfare system to introduce, and the European model offers a less brutal market economics, a capitalism that has room for something else besides market forces, but that's it. And now it's very theoretical, because how can you produce a welfare system if you don't have the money?

DT: Now, in this struggle against authoritarianism in the last whatever period, have NGOs (nongovernmental organizations) played an important part?

LM: What is called a civil society in Mexico is emerging, yes, yes. I think that if you look back twenty years ago it was a desert land, an empty land, a land without NGOs; there were a few unimportant ones, and the average Mexican never noticed that they existed. There was only one big, huge force, PRI and its corporations. Now, somebody told me, Mexico has ten thousand NGOs. Many of them are very local, and that's their advantage, that they are *local, really*. Some are national with one single purpose; others are local and multipurpose, very easy to adapt to the terrain they are working in. I am optimistic from that perspective, but I also know that looking at all the needs of a society like Mexico, NGOs right now are just a small item in the agenda. They have miles to go before reaching something that is more or less similar to the United States. They are in their infancy. But they are aggressive and very confident in themselves. That's what I like about NGOs. They have an answer for every problem. And they are everywhere, something unknown in the past. If the lady who is in charge of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has to go to Europe to explain something, she will be shadowed by two or three people from the NGOs who are telling

the European parliament, "No, no, no, no. That's a very unilateral description of the problem. We have an alternative explanation of what is happening in Mexico." That is *really* new, and for a Mexican, for an average Mexican or for a Mexican politician, to think about that fifteen years ago was just impossible. They would have said, "That's treason—high treason." Nobody in Mexico would have remained Mexican really if they showed themselves in the United States Congress, answering questions, aggressive questions, from United States senators or representatives who are considered enemies of Mexico. But now that's possible; not easy, but possible. And to accept reluctantly NGOs from the outside to look at Mexican problems—my God, that's another no-no. But now they have to accept that, because behind some of these NGOs are governments, some European governments are willing to support the NGOs, and even the United States government. Perhaps the United States is not the most aggressive actor in this field. Perhaps the Europeans are more. For example, the United States is not the leader in human rights; in the observation of human rights in Mexico, the Europeans are.

The nice thing about the NGOs is that they can say, "We don't represent anything in particular. I'm an observer. I'm looking at the elections. I'm not going to benefit myself in a personal way." For this reason they have a kind of moral leverage that unions, for example, don't have from the point of view of Mexicans.

DT: How do you see the course of nationalism in Mexico?

LM: The Mexican government is using right now this idea of nationalism to put a fence in front of foreign NGOs and to prevent Mexicans from going outside and exposing Mexican problems. But the efficacy of that strategy, if it is not equal to zero, it's close. Because Mexican nationalism was a creature of the government, it cannot have nationalism and globalization at the same time. Nationalism was an obstacle for Salinas, for his free trade project, but you can't dismantle nationalism from one side and encourage it from the other side. It's a unity.

NGOs are telling everybody who is willing to listen, "We are no less nationalistic than anybody here." But it's a different meaning. NGOs argue that nationalism is the last refuge of scoundrels. "They are not really nationalists. Look, they signed a free trade agreement with the United States. They want to merge Mexican society into the United States. So what nationalism are they talking about?" Right now nobody is using nationalism as a central element in their projections of Mexico into the future, nobody, not the Right nor the Left.

DT: Do you think the kind of stories you've been talking about will ultimately change the content and practice of history? History after all grew up in the early nineteenth century to tell the stories of nations.

LM: Perhaps, perhaps, because history has been used as a political tool in Mexico, especially after the revolution. There was a kind of orthodoxy, not like in the Soviet Union, but not entirely unlike the Soviet Union, in which history is an important element of legitimation. It was in Mexico. There was a kind of official history of Mexico, never in a formal way, but it was in a real way. Now we are looking at the

past, asking new questions, finding, for example, in the revolution one of the sources of our present authoritarianism. We are looking at today's problems, which have their beginning in what earlier had been considered the best of all possible worlds for Mexico. So we are questioning what was not questioned twenty years ago. And that's why historians can be public figures in Mexico. Look at Enrique Krauze, he is a big public figure now, with his new TV series on Mexican liberties.

DT: What kind of new history is he presenting? Or how is he using history?

LM: He is eroding the legitimacy of the present system by looking differently at its past. The first chapter of this TV series was "'68," the massacre of Tlatelolco in 1968, and it aired at a prime hour. After seeing the program, anybody can understand why President Gustavo Díaz Ordaz decided to use the army and the police and the repressive apparatus of the system, and implicitly the fault belongs not only to Díaz Ordaz but also to the PRI, the same party that is still in power. You don't have to make the connection. You allow the viewers to make their conclusions, but it's very evident the reasons behind Krauze's decision to start the series with "'68." So yes, history *is* playing a role. Historians are playing a role in rewriting history.

DT: Well, you are another historian playing a role in public debate.

LM: I have only a very small program in a governmental channel. There is a weekly program called, "The H-hour," the hour of history. But we don't produce our own programs, because we don't have money. We have our British, German, United States programs from cultural television, from public television, from the BBC, and my role is to make an introduction and a conclusion, and that's where I introduce the Mexican part. If you have to analyze Vietnam or the Third Reich or something like that, then my responsibility is to make an introduction, and I try in a subtle way to link what the viewer is looking at that took place in Germany fifty years ago and what is taking place here, right now.