

**GLOBALIZATION, NATIONAL DISCOURSE,
AND LEFT DISCOURSE IN MEXICO**

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Globalization, National Culture and Left Discourse in Mexico

Well into the 1980s, there was little doubt among most sectors of the Mexican left that the great social emancipation of the people would take place through a project of redistributive national economic development guided by a strong state. Even if many on the Marxist left historically expressed an ambivalence about the legacy of the Mexican Revolution, they generally shared with their more self-consciously nationalist siblings a faith in the existential unity of a Mexican nation indelibly marked by that Revolution and its cultural representations. However, the accelerated globalization of economic processes, political paradigms, and cultural practices over the past quarter-century have caused the Mexican left to reassess many of its old assumptions about the subject and object of revolutionary change.

In its efforts to renovate a viable left project appropriate to the new realities of the late twentieth century, some sectors of the Mexican left appear to be giving renewed importance to national culture, despite frequent forecasts regarding an inevitable, irreversible eclipse of the nation-state and the advance of cultural homogenization. In the post-NAFTA world, the prospects of a resurgent cultural nationalism on the left may sound anachronistic, even retrograde. Yet there are reasons to believe that the renewed nationalism of some on the Mexican left is far removed from the statism and economism of its past. Rather, recent attention by some on the left to questions of national culture seems more about a quest for an ethical renovation of the left that reflects a selective reappropriation of the best of the cohesive social values present in Mexican popular culture.

Discursive and political challenges from within the left itself began to fray some threads of statist and developmentalist nationalism as early as the 1960s. The anti-authoritarian and countercultural movements associated with 1968 and its aftermath (e.g., feminism, gay rights, environmentalism, and postmodernism) challenged the left's often unproblematized ideas

about the state, democracy, development, social justice, equality, and the protagonists of social change (whether within socialist or nationalist frameworks). However, the process of reassessment and renewal within the Mexican left was somewhat limited until quite recently. As Norma Chinchilla reminds us, questions such as “democracy and feminism were not topics of serious discussion in the search for an indigenous Latin American Marxism until the 1980s.¹ These are relatively new developments.

Moreover, the various strands of more radically antistatist, postmodern and poststructuralist theories about the “decentering of the [revolutionary] subject” and the failure of modernity’s nation-state-based Enlightenment project were relatively less influential in Latin America than in Western Europe and the United States.² The structural realities of the semiperiphery—extreme class inequalities, increasing poverty, and national subordination to core states and international capital—continued to correspond more closely to the traditional Marxist and nationalist paradigm than to any postmodern, postindustrial vision.

However, three concomitant, global developments in particular culminated at the end of the 1980s in a more thorough-going challenge to the statist and nationalist paradigm of the left in Mexico (and Latin America generally): the accelerated globalization and restructuring of the world-economy, the near-hegemonic rise of neoliberal ideology, and the sudden collapse of the former Soviet bloc.

¹ Norma Stoltz Chinchilla, “Marxism, Feminism, and the Struggle for Democracy in Latin America,” in Arturo Escobar and Sonia E. Alvarez (eds.), *The Making of Social Movements in Latin America. Identity, Strategy, and Democracy* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1992), p. 42.

² A particularly lucid and insightful analysis of these developments and their challenge to the paradigms associated with modernity, and therefore with the left, can be found in Stuart Hall, “The Question of Cultural Identity,” in S. Hall, et al., *Modernity and Its Futures* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992).

Capitalist Globalization and the National Left

All of Latin America has been deeply affected by the restructuring of the world-economy, which began at the initiative of core nations and core-based capital in response to the profit crisis of the 1970s. As the restructuring coincided with the exhaustion of national developmentalist projects in Latin America, severe financial crises emerged in the region. Even for the most successful nationalist development models, such as Mexico's post-1930s, import-substitution industrialization, such restructuring and financial crisis have generally involved a relative subordination of national policies to international financial institutions. The ability of individual nation-states to regulate or ameliorate these developments has been further undermined by the accelerated internationalization of capital.³ The signing of NAFTA formalized an already advanced trend toward Mexico's subordinated, regional economic integration within globalized capitalism.

Globalization and restructuring of the world-economy also posed challenges to the strong national cultures of Latin America, including in Mexico where one of the twentieth century's great revolutions had been waged in assertion of national identity. As Stuart Hall has observed, "a nation is not only a political entity but something which produces meanings—a system of cultural representation. People are not only legal citizens of a nation; they participate in the *idea* of the nation as represented in its national culture."⁴ The global process of integrating regional economies brought with it "the consequent interpenetration of cultures and customs,"⁵ threatening the traditional nationalism of countries like Mexico. Thus the challenges posed to the Mexican left by NAFTA and global economic restructuring were cultural and ideological as well, unraveling the very "idea" of the nation-state.

³ On world economic restructuring and its impact on developing nations, see, e.g., R. Jenkins, *Transnational Corporations and Uneven Development: The Internationalization of Capital and the Third World* (London: Methuen, 1987); A. Lipietz, *Mirages and Miracles: The Global Crisis of Fordism* (London: Verso, 1987); A. Alvarez, *La crisis global del capitalismo en México, 1968-1985* (Mexico City: Ediciones Era, 1987); and E. J. McCaughan, "Mexico's Long Crisis. Toward New Regimes of Accumulation and Domination," *Latin American Perspectives*, Vol. 20, No. 3, Summer 1993.

⁴ Stuart Hall, "The Question of Cultural Identity," *op. cit.*, p. 292.

⁵ Adolfo Gilly, "The Mexican Regime in Its Dilemma," *Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 43, No. 2 (Winter 1990), p. 276.

One of the most unsettling ideological developments accompanying economic restructuring has been the aggressive neoliberal ideological offensive, which originated in the Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher administrations and was supported by the intellectual and policy-making cadre of international financial institutions. Neoliberalism remains within the tradition of liberalism in its emphasis on free enterprise, the market, and individual initiative and responsibility. It is "neo" in its abandonment of twentieth-century liberalism's "politics of constant rational reform," which aimed at avoiding extreme social conflict through the integration of larger sectors of the population into the system, both nationally (through the welfare state and universal suffrage) and internationally (through national self-determination and developmentalism).⁶

The neoliberal ideological offensive proved to be astonishingly successful and further undermined left confidence in the nation-state's capacity to shepherd economic development and social transformation.⁷ In little more than a decade, broad sectors of intellectuals and policy makers around the world—including many leftists in Latin America—were apparently convinced that the eighteenth century ideologies of Adam Smith and David Ricardo would lead the way into the third millennium (even as nineteenth century Marxism was pronounced dead). Ideologically, neoliberalism attacked the traditional concept of national sovereignty. Marco Rascón, an important leader of Mexico City's urban popular movements, explained that while the *neocardenista* sector of Mexico's democratic opposition continued to insist that political sovereignty was impossible without economic sovereignty, the Carlos Salinas administration, with agreement from some sectors of the left, saw sovereignty as a "backward concept that stood in the way of globalization." According to Rascón, "The very essence of neoliberalism was to redefine the concept of sovereignty... For the neoliberals, sovereignty had become an

⁶ See Immanuel Wallerstein, "The Collapse of Liberalism," in R. Miliband and L. Panitch, eds., *Socialist Register* 1992 (London: Merlin Press, 1992).

⁷ On the influence of neoliberalism world-wide, see, e.g., S. Hall, *The Hard Road to Renewal* (London: Verso, 1988); J. Valenzuela Feijóo, *Crítica del modelo neoliberal* (Mexico: Facultad de Economía, UNAM, 1991); F. Hinkelammert, "Our Project for the New Society in Latin America: The Regulating Role of the State and Problems of Self-Regulation in the Market," in S. Jonas and E. McCaughan, eds., *Latin America Faces the Twenty-First Century* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994).

opponent of modernity and was therefore fiercely combated: sovereignty was the equivalent of the Wall of China."⁸

The embrace of neoliberal discourse by some sectors of the Latin American left was particularly evident in the Southern Cone nations of Chile and Argentina, where brutal military dictatorships devastated the historical lefts and ruptured strong national political cultures, leaving them particularly open to the influence of neoliberalism.⁹ However, while radical "free-market" tenets about the inevitability of capitalist globalization have been taken up more recently by some leftists in Mexico as well, the nationalist and social justice values of that nation's deeply rooted political and popular cultures, as well as the structural realities of the semiperiphery, continue to mediate the degree to which neoliberalism is accepted in Mexico.

Associated with both global economic restructuring and the rise of neoliberalism is the collapse of the Soviet bloc. The sudden fall of state socialism reverberated throughout the world's left, including in countries like Mexico where much of the left had developed a critique of "real socialism" as early as the 1960s. The East's debacle swept away any remaining illusions harbored by some of the left that an alternative socialist world-system was in the making. It eliminated the hope that state socialism might be reformed into a more democratic and humane alternative to capitalism. For others, the collapse of the Soviet bloc was the nail in the coffin of the state-centered models of national economic development and progressive social change long embraced by the left.¹⁰

⁸ Marco Rascón, "La soberanía y Chiapas," *La Jornada*, February 21, 1995. In his article, Rascón goes on to point out the inconsistency of President Ernesto Zedillo's justification of the government's military assault on the Zapatista rebels in Chiapas in the name of defending the nation's sovereignty.

⁹ Rhoda Rabkin has written a persuasive analysis of the importance of "ideas" in influencing center-left forces in Chile to embrace neoliberal economic policies; see R. Rabkin, "How Ideas Become Influential. Ideological Foundations of Export-Led Growth in Chile (1973-1990)," in *World Affairs*, Vol. 156, No. 1 (Summer 1993).

¹⁰ Useful accounts of how the disintegration of the socialist bloc affected the world's left can be found in: David Held, "Liberalism, Marxism and Democracy," in S. Hall, et al., *Modernity and Its Futures* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992); Carl Boggs, *Intellectuals and the Crisis of Modernity* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993); Immanuel Wallerstein, "Marxism After the Collapse of Communism," *Economic Review* (February/March 1992); Immanuel Wallerstein, "The Concept of National Development, 1917-1989. Elegy and Requiem," *American Behavioral Scientist*, Vol. 35, No. 4/5 (March/June 1992); Samir Amin, et al., *Transforming the Revolution. Social Movements and the World-System*

As Immanuel Wallerstein has argued, because socialist revolutions took place not in the core nations of the world-system, but in the periphery and semiperiphery, the "construction of socialism" in practice "became the process by which (semi) peripheral states would catch up with the core zones of the capitalist world economy."¹¹ The Soviet "program for national development" was greatly admired throughout the Third World, even by nationalist governments (like that of Mexico's Lázaro Cárdenas in the 1930s) and left forces who remained highly critical of the Soviet bloc. The Soviet Union's sudden collapse therefore symbolized for some of the left a great defeat for the very idea of national development.

Moreover, though sectors of the Latin American left were somewhat heartened by the "democratic revolutions" that swept through the East in 1989-1990, the uncertain post-Cold War order appeared ominous to many, particularly given how they coincided with disturbing events such as the Persian Gulf War and, regionally, the U.S. invasion of Panama and the electoral defeat of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua (following a punishing war financed and directed by the United States). The demise of the Soviet Union therefore also suggested to many on the left the unpleasant prospect of a unipolar world, of a substantially unrestrained, historically aggressive United States, making profound social changes at the national level in Latin American even more difficult.

As the century began its final decade, then, the old nationalist and statist paradigm that had long oriented and given identity to left intellectuals in Mexico was seriously shaken. While attending a play about Christopher Columbus in Mexico City in August, 1992, I unexpectedly found this paradigm crisis expressed in the program notes. Playwright Héctor Ortega had written:

The sudden fall of "real socialism," the loss of power, from one day to the next, of Gorbachev, the creator of "perestroika and glasnost," that is, the proposal for a democratic socialism that never came to be, influenced my melancholy reflections about utopias and their collapse.

(New York: Monthly Review Press, 1990); and Carlos Antonio Aguirre Rojas, "1989 en perspectiva histórica," *La Jornada Semanal* (April 4, 1993).

¹¹ Immanuel Wallerstein, "Marxism After the Collapse of Communism," op. cit., p. 34.

The effects on our country of these changes, of the Persian Gulf War with its fireworks, which liquidated 250,000 human beings, whom we never saw and whose death we never learned about on television, of the globalization of the planet, the birth or definition of its commercial nuclei as a threat to the concept of the nation, etc., have forced us to rapidly redefine ourselves.¹²

That process of redefinition has created a new discursive, if not organizational, constellation within the Mexican left. Predictably, the various transformations more or less loosely associated with capitalist economic globalization and the failure of old nationalist and socialist strategies have provoked considerable debate about questions such as the political and economic role of the state, the prospects for noncapitalist alternatives, and the relationship between political democracy and socioeconomic inequality. Orthodox socialist perspectives are in retreat but persist along side increasingly influential liberal (occasionally even neoliberal) thinking.

Yet liberalism's influence among the Mexican left is less than one might imagine in light of the crisis of socialism and the publicity given to moderate, reformist tendencies in the post-Cold War Latin American left.¹³ The historic project of liberal reformism has collapsed along with communism and does not represent a viable alternative for semiperipheral Latin American societies in the brutal, globalized capitalism of the late twentieth century.¹⁴ If anything, the core *ethical* values (if not the strategies) of the old socialist project—solidarity, social justice, and equality—have gained (not lost) relevance as the neoliberal restructuring of Latin America over the past two decades has swollen the ranks of the poor and further polarized one of the most socially unequal regions of the world. Renovative left ideas have begun to transcend the limitations of liberal and socialist orthodoxies and to challenge neoliberalism's current ideological reign, a process that can only benefit from the most recent series of debacles in Mexico—the show-case of neoliberal reform.

¹² Héctor Ortega, program notes to "El huevo de Colón," Teatro Juan Ruiz de Alarcón, Centro Cultural Universitario, Mexico City, August 1992.

¹³ See, e.g., Jorge Castañeda, *Utopia Unarmed. The Latin American Left After the Cold War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993).

¹⁴ On the crisis of liberalism, see Immanuel Wallerstein, "The Collapse of Liberalism," *op. cit.*

The Left Reasserts "Lo Nacional"

In light of these changes, and despite many predictions to the contrary, *nationalism* remains a powerful discourse in Mexico, where sectors of the left still (and perhaps increasingly) insists on the important national character of its social and political project. But, as Jorge Castañeda also has observed, it is a "new nationalism" no longer defined in terms of anti-Yanqui slogans and programs for economic autarky. Rather the left's nationalism is "a function of its hope and struggle . . . to give millions of excluded citizens of the hemisphere the nation they never had."¹⁵ For some on the Mexican left, there is a growing sense that such a task involves, beyond concrete economic and political alternatives, a new appreciation for the binding, nurturing, inclusive ethics of national popular culture.

Many on the Mexican left are giving increasing attention to Mexico's national culture in their efforts to shape their own identity and new visions and strategies for antisystemic change. For example, Américo Saldívar, a former Central Committee member of Mexico's old Communist Party, remains a staunch defender of "lo nacional," despite the fact that his perspectives on economic processes have been considerably "neoliberalized" in recent years.¹⁶ He explained, "Economic nationalism is an anachronism, it's not viable. But in terms of politics, culture, and discourse, nationalism and autonomy are relevant."¹⁷

In a world-system in which nation-states progressively cede control over economic and even political processes to transnational actors, contestation of what constitutes and who genuinely represents "lo nacional" takes place increasingly within the cultural and ideological realm.¹⁸ As Arturo Escobar has written, "just as crucial as the reconstruction of economies—

¹⁵ Jorge Castañeda, *op. cit.*, p. 325.

¹⁶ In June 1993, Saldívar gave a speech in Poland in which he reviewed the record of neoliberal reforms in Mexico and suggested that they could serve as an example for Eastern Europe's transition to a market economy. A "preliminary assessment" of Mexico's privatization program would have to consider it a "success," he summarized, since it "eliminated excessive protectionism and indiscriminate subsidies." A. Saldívar, "Realidad y límites del neoliberalismo mexicano," *Memoria*, No. 57, August 1993, p. 48.

¹⁷ Américo Saldívar, interview with author, Mexico City, August 4, 1993.

¹⁸ Two interesting examples of this were discussed in papers presented by Andrea Zhouri and Olga Celle de Bowman at the March 1994 Latin American Studies Associations meetings. Zhouri, writing on environmentalism in Brazil, and Celle, writing about the changing meaning of "Cholo" in Peru, both

and indelibly linked to it—is the reconstitution of meanings at all levels, from everyday life to national development.”¹⁹

One of the clearest examples of the cultural wars being waged over the meaning of the Mexican nation today was the conflict surrounding the Carlos Salinas administration's attempts to impose a new official Mexican history text book for the public schools, in which the country's traditional nationalism was largely exorcised.²⁰ Salinas's efforts provoked furious opposition.

Mexican historian Enrique Florescano noted recently that scholars are giving ever greater attention to the importance of cultural phenomena such as collective identities, national myths and heroes, and the construction of a nation's collective, historic memory. He sees no reason to believe that “globalization” will dilute the processes of constructing national identities and memories; it will simply occasion the creation of new self-affirming myths:

Groups, nations, and states are going to continue cultivating, defending, feeding their myths of origin and their myths of identity. And more so when they feel pressured from the outside. Mexico demonstrates this. Since 1821, when it became an independent republic, it has had to face one of the world's most powerful nations. And instead of adapting to the myths of the dominant nation, Mexico always created more, new myths to differentiate itself from the neighboring country, from the great power. Today, many new, totally different myths are emerging along the border to differentiate itself from the U.S.²¹

Florescano cites the new Zapatista movement in Chiapas as one that draws upon historical myths but “with a proposal for the future, not to go back.”²² The Mexican left's reclaiming of the banners of peasant revolutionary Emiliano Zapata and nationalist hero Lázaro Cárdenas are symbolic of the struggle to defend and redefine the meaning of “lo nacional.”

Such efforts are increasingly incorporated into grassroots organizing as well as in the discourse of *neozapatistas* and *neocardenistas*. For example, at the initiative of activist

described how meaning, signification, and national identity are being contested and reconstructed in two very different national contexts which have been radically affected by processes of globalization.

¹⁹ Arturo Escobar, “Culture, Economics, and Politics in Latin American Social Movements Theory and Research,” in Arturo Escobar and Sonia E. Alvarez, eds., *The Making of Social Movements in Latin America. Identity, Strategy, and Democracy* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1992), p. 69.

²⁰ See Enrique Maza, “En los libros de texto se resalta lo que quiere para justificar el proyecto salinista,” *Proceso* (Mexico), September 7, 1992.

²¹ Enrique Florescano, interview with Arturo García Hernández, in *La Jornada* (Mexico), March 9, 1995.

²² *Ibid.*

intellectuals and artists like Marco Rascón, Ofelia Medina, and Jesusa Rodríguez, many left-organized demonstrations and public forums in Mexico City during the past year have included participants dressed as Mexico's great national heroes and cultural luminaries: Hidalgo, Juárez, Morelos, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, Frida Kahlo. It is not surprising to find the left claiming the legacy of traditional heroes like Hidalgo and Morelos; the Cubans have José Martí; the Nicaraguans, Sandino; the Salvadorans, Farabundo Martí. But the presence of Frida and Sor Juana, artist and poet, suggest attempts by some on the left to renovative nationalist discourse with the feminist and cultural sensibilities of contemporary social movements and critical thought.

While the importance of such contention over symbols and meanings is recognized by the left, the stakes of the cultural war goes well beyond the discursive. Raúl Alvarez Garín, a leader of the 1968 student movement and a prominent figure in the Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD), ended one of our conversations by asking—"Is Mexico going to survive as a nation? And in what conditions? Are we going to end up like Puerto Rico: '*qué bonita bandera, qué bonita bandera*'?"²³ On the one hand, Mexico's deeply-rooted sense of national identity offers him some solace. It may be true that Mexico City receives cable television channels dedicated to broadcasting U.S. sports events and Hollywood movies—evidence of the so-called homogenization of global culture. But, as Carlos Monsiváis, chronicler of Mexico City's urban popular culture, has insisted, nationalism will endure, because it is the only language of internal communication for Mexican society; it will simply be a bilingual nationalism, reflecting the hybrid culture produced by the encounter between national culture and the U.S. cultural industry in the process of globalization.²⁴

²³ Raúl Alvarez Garín, interview with author, Mexico City, August 27, 1992.

²⁴ Carlos Monsiváis, interview with Marta Elena Montoya Vélez, in *La Jornada Semanal* (Mexico), September 13, 1992. On the issue of "hybrid" or "translated" national cultures in the era of globalization, see Nestor García Canclini, "Cultural Reconversion," in G. Yúdice, et al., *On Edge* (University of Minnesota, 1992); and Stuart Hall, "The Question of National Identity," in S. Hall, et al., *Modernity and Its Futures* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992).

The new Mexican nationalism of the left seems also likely to be bilingual in another sense. It will draw upon discourses of the old nationalist struggles as well as of new social movements and ethics. The reappropriation by the left of Frida Kahlo and Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, and efforts to reconstitute them as feminist, sexually unorthodox icons alongside traditional, macho, military leaders, illustrates this trend. More subtly, in the recent "cross-over" hit film, *Danzón*, we can see feminist sensibilities and changing attitudes about gender and sexuality transforming the nation's popular culture, even while the film maker reaches back to reclaim and reassert community-affirming musical and social modes of the nation's past. That film and its success, significantly, were made possible in part by the growing collaboration between the Mexican and Hollywood film industries, again suggesting that the new nationalism is more about cultural values and social ethics than old ideas about economic nationalism and autarky.

In spite of the very obvious penetration of Mexico by U.S. consumer culture through advertising, film, and television, there remains a strong, cohesive, distinctly Mexican culture. Many communitarian or collectivist values persist within the popular culture, even in an urban jungle like Mexico City. Illustrative in this regard were the grassroots "self-help" initiatives and urban movements that flourished following the tragic 1985 Mexico City earthquake.²⁵ Those efforts, as well as the emergence of new urban leaders like the cartoon hero-inspired Super Barrio, are evidence of the sense of community, belonging, and citizenship among the urban popular classes in Mexico City—cultural factors often absent in urban metropolises of the late twentieth century.²⁶

²⁵ On the impressive array of contemporary urban movements in Mexico, including those that emerged around the 1985 earthquake, see Carlos Monsiváis, *Entrada Libre. Crónicas de la sociedad que se organiza* (Mexico: Ediciones ERA, 1987); and Vivienne Bennett, "The Evolution of Urban Popular Movements in Mexico Between 1968 and 1988," in Arturo Escobar and Sonia E. Alvarez (eds.), *The Making of Social Movements in Latin America*, op. cit.

²⁶ In a provocative discussion of the role of culture in determining which peoples will survive the "scarcity, crime, overpopulation, tribalism, and disease [that] are rapidly destroying the social fabric of our planet," Robert Kaplan pointed to the "formidable fabric" of Turkish Muslim culture as playing a role somewhat analogous to what I am suggesting about national culture in Mexico. See Robert Kaplan, "The Coming Anarchy," in *The Atlantic Monthly*, February 1994.

While this may be true, Alvarez Garín also fears that the level of social disintegration caused by the past decade of crisis and restructuring could lead to a "worst case scenario in which Mexico devolves into another Yugoslavia, with regions fighting one another. Already," he commented in August 1993, "workers are armed, campesinos carry machetes—demanding responses to their unbelievably miserable conditions."²⁷ Tellingly, the Zapatista guerrilla war begun on January 1, 1994, by Indians in Mexico's southern state of Chiapas, both underscores his concerns about regional conflict and illustrates the cultural vitality of Mexico's revolutionary past as it accommodates to today's realities by using Zapata's image to press demands for democratic national elections.

Monsiváis agrees that the Mexican revolution profoundly transformed the national mind, and he has tremendous admiration for the vitality of Mexico's *popular* culture, but he also believes that, after 60 years of corrupt and authoritarian rule by the PRI, it will take an entire generation to build a new *political* culture. For the moment, he fears that even the social movements, which he views as the great sources of resistance to neoliberalism, are concerned primarily with survival, not with transformation.²⁸

Nor should we overstate the success of the *neozapatistas* in reconciling all indigenous demands with the broader struggle for democratization and social change within the framework of a national culture also marked by centuries of racism and colonialism. Indigenous demands for land and autonomy pose another formidable challenge to renewing Mexican nationalism on terms that are inclusive, flexible, and democratic. Some observers are less than optimistic that the left and the popular movements that are its base will fully engage that challenge until nations like Mexico have undergone a "total process of decolonization."²⁹

²⁷ Raúl Alvarez Garín, interview with author, Mexico City, August 6, 1993.

²⁸ Comments by Carlos Monsiváis during a talk on "Intellectuals and the State in Mexico," University of California, Santa Cruz, April 10, 1991.

²⁹ See Guillermo Delgado-P., "Ethnic Politics and the Popular Movement," in Susanne Jonas and Edward J. McCaughan, eds., *Latin America Faces the Twenty-First Century. Reconstructing a Social Justice Agenda* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994), pp. 77-88.

Clearly there are important contradictions and limitations to the role national culture and nationalism can and will play in shaping a new left project in Mexico. As a friend recently asked in response to my writings about nationalism and the left:

Is clinging to a state-bound strategy a dead-end? Capitalism, obviously, organizes globally. If the left continues to argue for a "place-bound" framework, are they clinging to the past rather than looking ahead?³⁰

His point is very well taken and has not been overlooked by everyone on the left in Mexico. Sergio de la Peña, for example, is certain that any profound systemic transformation must be global and, at the same time, rooted in the daily realities of the people, which are often defined by national history:

The problem is how to imagine an alternative without national limits, how to think about the processes of mobilization, of formulating projects that have to be at the same time world in scope but with more local viability. This is clearly a problem in Marxism: its international perspective was moving, but for a relatively privileged strata that could think about the world. For most of the population, however, their hopes, their conflicts are quotidian. Daily life doesn't move around a consciousness of class struggle, but rather around a consciousness about racial, sexual, national differences, about rich and poor.³¹

Thus even while acknowledging the necessarily global nature of any truly antisystemic project, many on the Mexican left believe that a mobilization of the political and social forces necessary to promote such a project requires keen attention to the national culture. For example, in arguing for a campaign to defend the social rights of Mexicans against neoliberal restructuring, Christina Laurel stresses that the principle of "social solidarity" and the social obligations of the state are deeply rooted in Mexican history.³² Social movements chronicler and theorist Jaime Tamayo points to Mexico's unique collective *ejido* system of land tenure. Tellingly, he stresses its cultural components more than its economic viability:

There are certain traditions, even certain communities in Mexico, which while far from what we could call modern or citizen-based, represent a form of socialism or include elements of socialism. The *ejido*, for example, was made with the *campesino*, not against the *campesino*, in contrast to the forced collectivization of Soviet agriculture. Here there still exist very strong collective conceptions of community, including some in which there is a dis-individualization of those who make them up. These perhaps offer an

³⁰ Bill Felice, personal correspondence with author, September 24, 1995.

³¹ Sergio de la Peña, interview with author, Mexico City, August 16, 1992.

³² Cristina Laurell, "Por la defensa y expansión de los derechos sociales," presentation at "Foro: Las luchas emancipadoras de fin de siglo," Mexico City, September 4, 1992.

opportunity to salvage and update elements of a Mexican socialist left project. *Neocardenismo* includes some such elements.³³

Despite the extent of neoliberal restructuring and Mexico's formal incorporation into a U.S.-dominated regional economy through NAFTA, Alejandro Alvarez is confident that the strength and depth of Mexican culture—its nationalism, sense of identity and pride, sense of community, social justice values—remain largely intact. Moreover, he considers them to be a very important integrating factor that gives historical cohesion to the left's project and makes Mexicans less susceptible to neoliberal discourse and to resignation before the supposedly inevitable forces of "globalization."³⁴

Surrealist poet Benjamín Peret has made a similar assessment in writing about Mexico's enduring myths and legends, such as that of Pancho Villa. Believing that the reconquest of our ability to imagine is as important as achieving equality and material well-being, Peret has described Mexico as a place where the creative, life-affirming myths of the revolutionary past remain "present in daily life, palpable in the street, the markets, there where the people gather and talk."³⁵

Thus even as economic globalization, neoliberalism's ideological ascendancy, the collapse of nationalist developmentalism, and the crisis of socialism suggest for many that all political and cultural processes must inevitably be subordinated to the universalizing logic of world capitalism, some of the Mexican left is examining its own national culture with renewed attention for elements of a renovated antisystemic project. The reconstitution of a left nationalism suggests a path littered with land minds. But it is a potentially very fruitful quest,

³³ Jaime Tamayo, interview with author, Guadalajara, August 20, 1992.

³⁴ Author conversation with Alejandro Alvarez on a drive up the Northern California coast, September 28, 1993. For an insightful discussion of the endurance of nationalism and national culture in the era of neoliberalism, see Gilberto López y Rivas, "Nación y neoliberalismo," *Memoria* (Mexico City), December 1993. A thoughtful assessment of the Mexican left's attempts to construct a new nationalism is offered by Cristina Puga, "Un nuevo nacionalismo para México," *Mundo* (Mexico City), July 1991. For the perspective on nationalism of a prominent intellectual who supported Carlos Salinas's "modernization," see Héctor Aguilar Camín, "La invención de México. Notas sobre nacionalismo e identidad nacional," *Nexos* (Mexico City), July 1993.

³⁵ Lourdes Andrade, "Benjamín Peret: magia, revolución y poesía," in *La Jornada Semanal* (Mexico City), November 13, 1994, pp. 23-26.

to the extent that the new nationalism of the Mexican left is constituted not rigidly around the state and the national economy but critically, self-consciously, and selectively around the people and their culture—their ideals, values, practices, and struggles—and by recognizing rather than denying the contradictions within popular culture.