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History Moving North

As Mexican society fragments, the impact will hit the United States with force -- and U.S. society is likely to fragment in some of the same ways

by Robert D. Kaplan

MEXICO is *the* example of failing capacity in a state that is supremely subtle and middle-of-the-road -- not extreme, like many sub-Saharan African states, or even Pakistan, and not quite so wretchedly vast, intractable, and bureaucratic as India or China. After a few weeks in those countries one is ready to tear one's hair out. Mexico, though, is remarkably modern and easy for businesspeople to deal with. Indeed, without Mexico's dynamism -- a partial rebuke to the *mañana* cliché -- the Mexican state wouldn't be in as much trouble as it is. A country of Wal-Marts and shantytowns, of wholesome beach resorts and drug-dealing policemen with gold chains around their necks, Mexico offers a view into the future that is both reassuring and terrifying. To understand how the map of Mexico is being transmuted is to see more clearly where the United States may be headed.

To begin: the December, 1994, peso crisis, as a result of which the peso lost half its value, is a blind alley for analyses of Mexico's future. It was not the first currency crisis in Mexico, and it won't be the last. In 1940 Graham Greene wrote, in *The Power and the Glory*, "the peso dropped with a revolution." If there had been no peso crisis, or if Mexico's recovery from the crisis were complete, Mexico's destiny would be the same. What really ails the Mexican economy is so basic, undramatic, and long-term that it does not translate into news, and is therefore ignored.

Antonio Alonso Concheiro, of Analítica Consultants, who is one of Mexico's leading planners and futurists, briefed me recently on Mexico's underlying illness. Here is a summary of what he said.

Though Mexico's rate of population growth has been steadily dropping from a high of 3.4 percent in the 1960s, each year for years to come almost two million new Mexicans will join the population, which is currently 92 million. Forty percent of Mexicans are now so poor that using a condom every time they had sex would cost more in a year than they spend on clothes. If population growth continues at around two percent, a million or more Mexicans will be added to the work force annually through 2020, in a country where real unemployment is already roughly 25 percent. The Mexican government reports that 40 percent of its citizens are now under fifteen. Just to create enough menial jobs, Mexico's economy must grow by six percent annually. To create good jobs and move the country into the First World -- where Mexican government officials and some upbeat American analysts claim that Mexico is slowly headed -- the economy would have to grow by nine or ten percent. In 1995, however, the economy contracted by three percent, because of the devaluation of the peso; the best Mexico can

hope for in the foreseeable future, Alonso told me, is a steady economic growth rate of three or four percent. Nobody except wild optimists disputes this.

Either or both of two things will therefore happen: Mexico will gradually become poorer and more crime-ridden than it already is, and Mexicans will migrate to the United States at an even greater rate than they are migrating now. Many of those heading north will be attracted not so much by job prospects as by family networks already established across the border. Needless to say, many of Mexico's most dynamic workers are being lost through northward migration.

Up to this point Alonso's briefing merely recounted obvious, if not well-publicized, realities. Next he inserted an opinion. "I see a good scenario and a bad scenario. The good scenario is that we will soon face a challenge much more severe than the peso crisis: something like a trade war between Japan and the United States that leads to a world recession [and undermines Mexico], or a complete freeze in Mexican immigration by the U.S. authorities. That would lead to intensive destruction of current Mexican political institutions over the next decade, and the rise of local bosses and free-enterprise networks to replace them." Unaware, perhaps, that he was paraphrasing Edward Gibbon in *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Alonso said that a weak and highly flexible central government is necessary for the continued existence of the state. Currently, 80 percent of all Mexican tax revenues go to the central government.

Alonso's bad scenario is that "no true crisis will emerge." Indeed, the Mexican government and American editorial writers have already proclaimed Mexico's recovery from the peso crisis; over the long term, according to the bad scenario, the low-level erosion of the state will continue -- in a sufficiently gradual way as to be always deniable, but leading to quasi-anarchy.

Mexico, as I said, is a nuanced example of state failure. The future will likely see a middle path between Alonso's good and bad scenarios. The public ridicule to which the current President, Ernesto Zedillo Ponce de Leon, has been subjected, and Zedillo's intention to break precedent by not choosing his own successor in 2000 (this intention was rejected by the party at its convention last fall), are but two indications that Mexico's highly centralized presidential system is unraveling. Institutional reform in the country will, though, probably not be as fast or as deep as is necessary.

Working from Alonso's briefing and also material from Mexican government statistics, interviews with other Mexicans, including former officials, and my own recent travel there, I will draw a map of the southern part of North America in the early and middle decades of the next century.

MEXICO'S population growth is geographically unbalanced. Whereas women in the southern Mexican states of Guerrero, Oaxaca, and Chiapas have, on average, four or more children over a lifetime, those in northern Mexico have two or three. Southern Mexico follows a Third World, Central American-style growth pattern, northern Mexico a First World, U.S.-style one.

Chiapas is a highly publicized example, and Guerrero a much less publicized one, of southern Mexican dissolution, in which a deadly combination of high birth rates, widespread deforestation, and cocaine smuggling has weakened the legitimacy of the state. From 1970 to 1990 Chiapas' s population doubled, growing at one of the world' s highest rates: 3.6 percent a year. Much of the deforestation in Chiapas over the past 500 years has occurred in the past twenty-five years. More people, scarce land, and nutrient-poor soil have created extreme economic and social conditions with which the state cannot cope, fraying already weak local loyalty to Mexico City. Had Wall Street investors paid more attention to the warnings of environmental-security experts, they would not have been surprised by the Indian-dominated Zapatista uprising in Chiapas in January of 1994, which helped to sink the peso. The uprising may now be over; cycles of violence are usually short-term, because of the energy involved. But the state' s power in the south will continue to wane.

Meanwhile, Guerrero has become a cauldron of protests and roadside ambushes of both peasants and policemen. Though many of the government' s opponents espouse noble goals, Zapatistas and others alike are said to be just as deeply involved in the drug trade as the government is, and to include violent criminals whom opposition leaders cannot control. There are no good guys. According to Eduardo Valle, a former special prosecutor for the Mexican Attorney General, in an article in *New Perspectives Quarterly*, Mexican drug cartels reportedly collect as much as 40 percent of the street price of Colombian cocaine as their fee for transporting it to U.S. markets. Valle cited an article in the newsletter *Mexico Report* to the effect that annual profits from drugs moving through Mexico to the United States are more than double the revenues of Mexico' s petroleum industry. By some estimates, 70 percent of all the marijuana and cocaine entering the United States comes by way of Mexico, and as much as $30 billion in drug money is laundered near the Mexican-U.S. border each year. Drugs constitute the economic subsoil of Mexico -- the subterranean part of North American free trade that doesn' t require treaties or congressional approval.

Northern Mexico is at the same time knee-deep in the drug trade and being sucked into the sphere of American prosperity, with Sunbelt-style towns featuring American restaurants and car dealerships and American businesspeople everywhere. At least two thirds of the *maquiladoras* -- foreign-owned factories that import raw materials duty-free from the United States and other countries for use in products to be exported -- are in northern Mexico. The air links between the southwestern United States and northern Mexican cities such as Monterrey and Chihuahua are increasingly strong. Though California' s hostility to Mexican immigration garners media attention, even conservative Texas politicians, including Governor George Bush Jr. and Senator Phil Gramm, greet with enthusiasm steps to strengthen bonds with Mexico.

The different responses of California and Texas to the Mexican challenge are geographically determined. California has major urban centers close to the Mexican border -- San Diego and Los Angeles -- that make it vulnerable to illegal migrants; Texas does not to the same extent. (El Paso has a population of only 579,000, as compared with 1.2 million in San Diego and almost 3.5 million in Los Angeles.) The Pacific coast of Mexico near California has throughout history been a route of trade and migration, and northwestern Mexico does not have an urban center to compete with San Diego and Los Angeles to the extent that Monterrey, Mexico' s third largest city -- booming and industrialized -- is able to compete with cities in Texas. Monterrey retains many of the migrants who would otherwise move to Texas. The high-decibel political war over immigration in California

is partly a sideshow. The reunification of the Lone Star State and northeastern Mexico is history quietly and boringly in the making.

Northern Mexico, like southern Mexico, has what the Argentine political scientist Guillermo O' Donnell calls "brown zones," in which "the presence of the state is very low" or the knowledge that "the police are working with the drug traffickers . . . has led to the delegitimation of state authority." The coastal state of Sinaloa, in northwestern Mexico, is "brown" and, by all accounts, getting browner. Sinaloa is drug country. Nowhere else in the world have I seen so many handguns sticking out of the pants of men in civilian clothes, who even carry them into first-class restaurants. Federal "policemen" in baseball hats and T-shirts ride in pickup trucks and carry assault rifles. Drugs and violence, though, are only half of the Sinaloan reality. Sinaloa produces three quarters of Mexico' s soybeans and a third of its sesame seeds. Brand-new office buildings and hotels are crowded with American businesspeople. Employment opportunities in Sinaloa draw migrants from poorer Mexican provinces. Sinaloa is an emerging neo-medieval principality of the new North America, partly independent and completely amoral, where multinational business and organized crime are entangled in ways that neither is fully conscious of, creating future prosperity while eroding the rule of law.

Between the north and the south is Mexico City, where almost a third of the residents are migrants, many of whom live in shantytowns. But the shantytowns are as much a diversion as is the glittering and expensive Zona Rosa, where most of the luxury hotels are situated. The real story is in the many banal districts in which Mexico City is increasingly assuming the character of a middle-class city-state, where Wal-Marts, Price Clubs, Blockbuster Videos, and ATM machines are as commonplace as they are in any American city. This is not a narrow petite bourgeoisie -- the nationalistic kind that emerged in nineteenth-century Central Europe, say, and in post-Second World War Greece, the kind that fortifies state identity. Rather, it is a postmodern middle class connected to the wider world by satellite dishes, fax machines, and mobile phones. This middle class does not rule its own house, however, nor does it have a scintilla of respect for those who do rule it. As one Mexican writer told me, "We have a Soviet-style regime" with a party mafia but without even the pretense of an ideology.

Revulsion against the state, both moral and practical, is expressed by the universal belief that the police are involved in many crimes that occur in the city, including house break-ins and carjackings in which the victim is forced to drive to his ATM machine and withdraw cash before handing over his vehicle. It is not uncommon for a carjacking victim to report that the car was stolen while it was parked, out of fear that the police will take revenge if he or she identifies the perpetrators. The best gauge of the fear of crime is public behavior as demonstrated through architecture: wire mesh and electronic security systems predominate in the richer sections of Mexico City. The fortress architecture of the villa in the southern suburb of Coyoacán where Leon Trotsky lived in an unsuccessful attempt to hide from Stalinist agents in the late 1930s is now typical of the area. New townhouse developments are gated and employ private security guards.

Ominous as all this may sound, I felt safer in Mexico City than I have in many American urban areas. The custom of taking daytime siestas and working late into the evening means that the streets are crowded at night. Mexico is to a significant extent a homogeneous society: 90 percent of the population is mestizo -- a mixture of Spanish and Indian. In Mexico hardened class distinctions are the historical norm, and people accept them. Were

fortress architecture to predominate in the United States, I wonder whether our society, in which hardened class distinctions are less acceptable and the poorest people have a different skin color, would be able to survive.

Nevertheless, the Mexican state is beset on all sides, facing as it does more crime, more poor people in the villages and shantytowns to placate, more multinational businesses whose respect for Mexican sovereignty is nil, and more citizens who are well educated and well informed about the rest of the world and thus more difficult to satisfy. Some observers speculate that as the civilian power structure weakens, the army will play a larger role. This would be disastrous. Given the pervasiveness of narcotics money in the economy, the Mexican army, with its airplanes and high-tech communications gear, would simply become the world's most formidable drug dealer.

TO say that three Mexicos are emerging -- Mex-America in the north, Mex-Central America in the south, and city-state Mexico City -- is only a beginning. The future will be messier. "Modernization is undoing the state," a former top official told me. "We are reverting to weakly governed Indian-style fiefdoms -- a Balkanized tributary-state Mexico, as in the time of the Aztecs." Mexico, not unlike the Balkans, is geographically a myriad of mountainous indentations that divide the population, particularly in the south. The paucity of navigable rivers contributes to disunity. The Aztecs in Tenochtitlán did not really constitute a centralized tyranny over pre-Hispanic Mexico: they dominated a triple alliance composed of themselves and the Indians in Texcoco and Tacuba. This alliance, while it lasted, administered a loose tributary-state system around Tenochtitlán; the Spanish soldier of fortune Hernán Cortés pitted several Indian groups against the Aztecs on his way to vanquishing the Aztecs in 1521. In much of the west the Tarascan Indians were a law unto themselves. Mexico's northwestern desert in the vicinity of the current U.S. border -- the forsaken region from which the Aztecs had once migrated -- was always unstable. Aztec Mexico could become a vague model for twenty-first-century Mexico, 500 years after its defeat.

The strong and stable civilian-led state of the 1940s through the mid-1990s, dominated by the Institutional Revolutionary Party, is a rarity in Mexico's otherwise turbulent history. Mexico's war of independence from Spain lasted eleven years, from 1810 through 1821, and cost 600,000 lives. The first three decades of independence saw fifty governments. Then came caste violence over land between Indians, on the one hand, and mestizos and criollos (the Spanish settlers)on the other. The chaos of the Mexican Revolution -- in which southern rebels led by Emiliano Zapata and northern guerrillas led by Francisco "Pancho" Villa, Alvaro Obregón, and Pablo González fought both each other and the waning dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz in Mexico City -- went on for nearly a decade, until 1917, with no conclusive result. In 1920 rebels assassinated President Venustiano Carranza in southeastern Mexico, and took power.

Stability was achieved in the mid-1940s. But success brought development, which in turn brought a new category of problems. Since 1940 Mexico's population has risen almost fivefold, and it continues to grow. From 1970 to 1995 it nearly doubled. In the Valley of Mexico a great lake that once held the two Aztec Venices of Tenochtitlán and Tlatelolco, linked by causeways, has been sucked dry, and rivers have turned into underground sewers. Water for the city must be pumped from farther and farther away. Mexico City, founded by water, will "die for the lack of it," the poet Homero Aridjis laments. At a time of dissolving borders and distances the nation

as a whole, with 92 million inhabitants, an impressive system of electronic communications, and a whole new subproletariat in shantytowns trying to fight its way into the middle class, is due for another decades-long round of roiling, combustible history. And Mexico's population is now more than a third that of the United States, rather than the 15 percent it was in 1940.

History is, above all, about geography and migration, and Latin history, in human terms, is about to move north. In Mexico Iwas struck by the pervasiveness of uniformed schoolchildren toting briefcases. While walking along a sun-blasted street in Culiacán, in Sinaloa, the cardboard of my notebook damp with sweat, Inoticed a classroom of children through the rusted grillwork in a brick wall. There was clearly no air-conditioning despite the 100-degree heat, yet the children were hard at work -- some raising their hands to answer the teacher's questions, others writing quietly in their exercise books. In a transnational North America ten or twenty years hence would these children end up competing with less-competent Americans?

In 1990 there were 13 million new members of the working-age population in the countries immediately south of the U.S. border -- Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean Basin -- as opposed to about nine million in the United States. In 2020 there will be 14 million new job-seekers south of the border but only about half a million in the United States. Immigration limits on Mexicans in the United States are unsustainable over the long term. From 2000 to 2050 the Hispanic component of the U.S. population is expected to more than double, from 10 to 22 percent. The Mexican author Carlos Fuentes has written, "The U.S.-Mexico border [will] be one of the great hubs of an interdependent culture . . . for the 21st century, if we do not drown it in blood and intolerance."

The future is likely to hold new cultural-regional identities, in which Monterrey has more in common with cities in Texas than those cities have with other places in the United States. Moreover, the weakening of Washington and Mexico City, together with the emergence of a Mexican middle class that produces high-quality exports competing with ours, will give rise to new kinds of cultural competition. But new commonalities between middle-class Americans and middle-class Mexicans could at the same time create another dynamic that dilutes traditional Americanism and further isolates blacks. It may be that middle-class U.S. whites will feel psychologically closer to middle-class Mexicans than they do to African-Americans.

The release of Mexico from the dead weight of central control would not just erode national unity. It could also drive up economic growth rates, leading to a new prosperity -- and helping rather than hindering drug cartels and other criminal enterprises. In North America states and the whole notion of statehood may already be in decline, though their loss of cohesion will be extremely gradual and always deniable.

The French historian and political theorist Fernand Braudel observed that the most significant historical agents are shaped by the economies and institutions in which they operate, and those, in turn, are shaped by climate and geography. Mountains, not rulers, come first. In other words, North America may have a geographic destiny in which the laughably arbitrary lines separating us from Mexico and Canada will disappear, even as relations between the East Coast and Europe, the West Coast and Asia, and the Southwest and Mexico all grow closer. Regions and small principalities may emerge in both Mexico and the United States, conditioned by local geography, culture, and other factors. Two other French thinkers, Michel Foucault and Claude Lévi-Strauss, have

emphasized that there may be no end, or beginning, to history -- only continual upheavals and transformations, with absolutely no moral purpose. Mexico' s evolution teaches us likewise. Not just the Mexican state but also ours may be only a long interlude.

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