

Cárdenas and the Masses

Arturo Anguiano

Lázaro Cárdenas has entered Mexican folklore as the greatest friend and benefactor of the poor and marginalized. Not surprisingly, he has also been vilified by large landowners, foreign oil companies, and conservatives of all stripes. But there is also a significant body of literature which critiques Cárdenas from the left. Some Marxist writers, with the benefit of hindsight, have identified in his rule the origins of many of Mexico's persistent problems: government domination of labor unions, the continuing poverty of the peasantry, a fixation on industrialization at the expense of human needs, and the clear triumph of state capitalism. A fairly typical example of this perspective is excerpted below.

The new governing forces headed by Lázaro Cárdenas knew that the class struggle was bound to worsen. They therefore considered it necessary to guide the mass movement of workers and peasants by winning their support and orienting their struggles so as to strengthen the State, giving it power that it could use to foment the country's industrial development. The destruction of the large landed estates and the transformation of the old rural structures brought Mexico into the era of mechanization and capitalist relations. Meanwhile, the renovation and encouragement of industry, which obliged the bourgeoisie to break with their anachronistic practice of exploiting the working class to the point of exhaustion, were objectives that the State not only was able to carry out, but carried out without provoking serious social conflicts that might well have caused the incipient social and political regime to waver and break apart. The State lacked its own social base, since the capitalist class did not yet fully identify its interests with those of the government; only the assistance of the masses would allow it to impose its will and realize its objectives.

In order to achieve this, Cárdenas, as the new representative of the State, adopted a policy which, in addition to conciliating classes and conceding social reforms to the workers and peasants, took on a new character that differentiated it from all preceding governments. We shall call this policy "mass politics," since it appealed to the masses and provoked their mobilization. . . .

Although mass politics would surely have developed independently of the person who occupied the presidency, it is certain that Cárdenas's unique personal characteristic and particular style were decisive in reestablishing relations between the State and the working masses. His austere character, firm and full of patience; his strength and dedication to labor; the simplicity of his lifestyle and his egalitarianism—all were keys that allowed him to approach the masses, beginning a new relationship of apparent equality with them. That personality manifested itself in his first acts of government, which were designed to win the sympathy of the masses. Thus, he eliminated the wearing of dress-coats at official ceremonies; he turned Chapultepec Castle, which had till then been the presidential residence, into a museum, while he continued to live with his wife in their private home and later in "Los Pinos" [the current presidential residence]; he cut in half the salaries of government officials, using the rest for "projects for the collective betterment"; he condemned gambling, closing the Foreign Club of Cuernavaca, which included some politicians and military men among its members; and he carried out other measures of this kind. Especially important was his order that the telegraph offices dedicate one hour a day, free of charge, to transmitting the complaints and opinions of peasants and other workers. Such measures had tremendous repercussions, since General Cárdenas's no-nonsense image spread to every corner of the country and won much sympathy among the most diverse social sectors. Cárdenas's image was accepted and admired by the worker and peasant masses, which easily distinguished it from that of traditional politicians.

What best allowed Cárdenas to ally himself with the masses were his constant travels, which brought him to even the most remote and unknown parts of the country. Cárdenas went in search of the masses, and he linked himself closely with them. His electoral campaign, and the trips he took during his administration, were supposed to be a means of learning the conditions of life and the needs of the people at first hand, of studying the problems of each region and the means to resolve them. During his trips, just as in Mexico City, he listened patiently for hours to the workers, peasants, and small farmers who brought him their problems and their complaints. "They have so many needs," said Cárdenas, "they lack so many things, that I can at least listen to them with patience." Cárdenas gave them advice or promised to fulfill their demands. The trips also aimed to "educate the people" in order to secure their cooperation. They taught the masses "the precise conception of their rights and obligations," even though some believe that Cárdenas hoped personally to oversee compliance with his decisions and even to control local leaders.

The trips to every corner of the country constituted one of the special elements of the mass politics that Cárdenas originated. His direct relationship

with the peasants and workers, his socializing with them, allowed him to win the confidence of people who, lacking consciousness and direction of their own, saw in the president someone they could confide in, who listened to them and helped them to resolve their problems. He was not the usual "strong man," hostile, someone to be feared; nor was he the phantasmagorical president whom people heard speak from time to time and who lived in some place they knew nothing about and could not even begin to imagine. No, this president was a man of flesh and blood, a man they could talk to, who would not scold them, who encouraged them to fight for their own vindication. This political style allowed Cárdenas to obtain considerable support and enabled him to control the masses of workers and peasants. . . . Cárdenas was sprouting his "own roots," cementing his authority and power, gaining strength sufficient to achieve the key objective that the State had assigned itself, namely, the industrialization of the country, with all that that implied. . . .

Cárdenas made direct, physical contact with the workers and peasants fundamental to the practice of government. Official functionaries now had to become mass leaders of sorts. In order to ally themselves with workers and peasants they would have to seek them out in the workplaces, in the regions where they lived, with the aim of learning their problems and needs directly. By linking themselves closely with the masses, by beginning a permanent relationship with them, these functionaries would be able to guide them along institutional channels, to control them and regulate their struggle, snuffing out any rebellious tendencies and winning a broad base of support. The Cárdenas style invaded the country, and the governors, along with gubernatorial or congressional candidates, found themselves obliged to adopt the new political strategies.

Cárdenas launched before the entire country an immense propaganda campaign designed to encourage organization, unification, and discipline among the workers and peasants. In every workplace he visited, in every meeting where he spoke to workers, he insisted again and again, to the point of exhaustion, on the need for workers to organize. This would be the president's transcendental preoccupation, his obsession, and it would lead Cárdenas to become the most important propagandist and the leading promoter of the mobilization of the working masses. . . .

But Cárdenas did not just initiate and promote the organization of the workers and peasants into unions or agrarian leagues; his objective was the complete unification of workers and peasants. He criticized inter-union squabbles that arose among workers, denouncing them as "sterile and criminal," and pointing out that the bosses could take advantage of these conflicts. Orga-

nization had to result in unification, in the integration of a united front of all workers. . . . This must include those workers who were as yet unorganized, who were now encouraged to join unions.

In effect, Cárdenas prepared the way for the actions of the State, which was the promoter of worker and peasant organization. Peasants were organized directly by the State, which, through the PNR, took the task into its own hands; workers were aided and encouraged to commit themselves to the State. The president did this because he knew the advantages of worker organization. In his struggle to modernize the country, doing away with large landholdings and fomenting industrialization, Cárdenas, as representative of the State, appealed to the masses and solicited their collaboration in order to begin in earnest to transform the country's economic conditions, obliging the bosses to submit to the laws and the hacendados to accept the government's resolutions in agrarian matters. Without the collaboration of the masses of workers and peasants, "organized, disciplined and unified," Cárdenas reckoned it would be difficult to impose the State upon all social sectors, especially the privileged classes, and to create the bases necessary for the country's economic progress. . . .

The organization and unification of the workers not only served as a base of support for the State that Cárdenas headed, but also put an end to the inter-union squabbles that disrupted the economy. With the workers dispersed among many organizations, each fighting for dominance, struggles were guided from within, that is, by the wage workers themselves; strikes would break out, factories would stop production, the workers would cease to collect their wages, and the factory owners' losses would force them to raise the cost of their products. This retarded industrial development, which is why Cárdenas thought it necessary to unify the workers and reestablish good relations among them. . . .

The policy of promoting the organization and unity of the workers did not run the risk of being counterproductive for the State or for the nation's capitalists. Cárdenas took care to guide the workers' struggle toward purely economic rewards, and when they were integrated into the political process, they remained subordinate to, and controlled by, the State, through the official party. The limited consciousness of the workers, which was formed by the unions and their leaders, was another guarantee that the unification of the workers would not endanger the stability of the regime. On the contrary, the workers were organized precisely in order to maintain and consolidate that stability. Moreover, the organization and unification of the proletariat gave the workers uniform objectives and strengthened them, putting them in a

position to demand from their bosses better economic benefits which would redound to the benefit of the national market, since with less miserable wages the workers would increase their purchasing power and consume manufactured and agricultural products. This stimulated production and increased the profits of the capitalists. . . .

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The Perils of Modernity

By the 1930s Mexico's leaders had come to question the conventional wisdom of classical economics, which held that unfettered trade would benefit all peoples in equal measure and within roughly the same time frame. The international capitalist system, they claimed, favored industrialized countries disproportionately, and adverse terms of trade would keep the exporters of raw materials forever mired in poverty. Accordingly, Mexico adopted the new economic strategy of Import Substitution Industrialization (ISI), a state-led effort to replace imports with locally manufactured products. To shield fledgling factories from foreign competition, the government established protective tariffs, import quotas, and import licensing. It also gave subsidies and tax breaks to encourage private investment in industry.

By some measures, this strategy succeeded spectacularly. The Mexican economy grew at an impressive average annual rate of 6.5 percent between 1940 and 1970, and Mexico was transformed from a predominantly agricultural country to one where industry accounted for more than a third of total production. Such numbers prompted some to speak giddily of a "Mexican Miracle."

It was no miracle. While the economy enjoyed robust growth, Mexico had one of the world's most unequal patterns of income distribution. And while the government fomented industrial development, it neglected agriculture, especially the production of basic foodstuffs. The *ejidal* sector—at one time heralded as the revolution's crowning achievement—remained primitive and impoverished. Potential rural unrest was partly contained by the incorporation of the *ejidos* into the ruling party's massive bureaucracy—a bureaucracy that was plagued by extraordinarily high levels of corruption, factionalism, favoritism, and clientelism. Many peasants who found only misery in the countryside headed for the U.S. border; many more made their way to the cities, especially to Mexico City, which grew at a vertiginous pace. There, they often found themselves packed into improvised and dehumanizing slums.

Meanwhile, the overprotected industries spawned by ISI proved inefficient