Mexico and the global problematic: power relations, knowledge and communication in neoliberal Mexico
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Chapter Five

MEXICAN SOCIAL ASSEMBLAGES

Territory, Population, and Government

The Mexican nation state is a social assemblage constituted by extensive territories and diverse populations that interact with a political system based on the articles of the 1917 Constitution (1). This document foresees a nation formed by states joined in a federation: the Mexican Republic, or the United States of Mexico. The Mexican territory accounts for one of the largest countries in the world: of more than three million square kilometres, it is roughly comparable to the total area of Argentina, surpassing the size countries such as Mongolia and Iran. Its long coastlines are mostly underdeveloped, with only two large scale ocean ports: Lázaro Cárdenas on the Pacific coast and Altamira on the Gulf of Mexico. It has one of the longest and most conflictive borders in the world to the North with the US. It was estimated by the Mexican National Institute of Population and Geography and other civil society organisations that approximately half a million Mexicans crossed the border illegally to live and work in the US in 2005. In 2009 there was an average of one death per day at the border of individuals trying to cross to the US illegally. In addition to this, plenty of legal border crossings take place every day, mostly for commercial purposes. The situation on the southern border with Guatemala also has various problems (2).

Mexico is also a very populous country. In 1980, at the beginning of the period I have termed contemporary globalisation in previous chapters, the official population census of the Mexican government revealed a total population of 66.8 million Mexicans. In 1990 (one year after the fall of the Berlin Wall), the census count had grown to 81.2 million Mexicans. In 2000 there were 97.4 million, and in 2010 the total was set at 112.3 million. The distribution of the population in Mexico is uneven and moves from highly concentrated urban areas to low population density in other territories. For instance, some Mexican states have less than 3 million inhabitants, despite the fact that their territorial areas surpass the size of European countries such as Greece and Austria. The state of Chihuahua, for instance, with an area of approximately 245,000 square kilometres (about the size of the United Kingdom), accounts for less than five million Mexicans. On the other side, there were over 20 million people living in Mexico City’s metropolitan area in 2010.

From the 1950s to the 1990s, the Mexican population registered extraordinary growth, and this explosion was felt most poignantly in urban areas. This was fuelled by rural to urban migration flows, among other factors. Intensified rural to urban migration deterritorialised the identity of the traditional countryside, and territorialised a stronger urban identity at the national and local levels.
The demographic and spatial expansion of the cities also marked an identity shift to a more modern-global Mexico. Greatly influenced by this shift in the physical distribution of human populations (the ‘human geography’) in Mexico today are the grave levels of economic and social polarisation. In spite of a relative cultural homogeneity across social groups and regions (e.g. language), official calculations about the levels of poverty in the country expose over half of the total population to be living below the poverty line, in many cases in extreme poverty (3).

During the *contemporary globalisation* period between 1980 and 2010, the intensification of the experience of the global problematic on the personal scale in Mexico saw an absolute increment. The historical divide between the wealthy and the poor – a ‘fifty-fifty’ ratio – was not overcome in this period, in spite of technological advances and economic growth. Thus in 1980, when the total population was just over 66 million, half of the population living below the poverty line amounted to roughly 33 million people; but in 2010 we see how, following the almost doubling of the total population to 112.3 million, the official estimates of half the population living in poverty amounts to a corresponding doubling of the total number of poor to approximately 50 to 60 million people.

This assessment of the *absolute* increase in the experience of poverty in Mexico reveals an often overlooked issue: every decade the total number of people who are subjected to the conditions and power diagrams of poverty and violence increases. The fact remains that even if poverty has been reduced or kept within the fifty per cent proportion, the *absolute* experience and the *feelings* of lack associated with poverty keep on rising. This also means that statistical analysis, while demonstrating the stability of the *proportion* in the distribution of poverty, may not show the absolute *intensification* of the global problematic. A ‘real’ intensification of the global problematic, however, is clearly taking place at the personal scale – the scale of feeling – with millions of Mexicans subjected to the experience of poverty and violence. This situation is characterised by a lack of opportunities, education, and good health, insecurity, and general feelings of a lack of dignity.

In Mexico, there are a variety of human groups that, following a history of colonisation, have blended, resulting in the Mestizo phenotype. A new human group emerged from the mixture of American, African, and European ‘biological materials’ during the colonial period, what José Vasconcelos refers to in his book *The Cosmic Race* (1997) as the ‘fifth race’ (4). There is, however, one specific group in Mexico that deserves particular attention today: the indigenous populations. These indigenous populations are spread across Mexican territory and maintain fundamental similarities and differences between them. In 2010 the native populations represented six to fifteen per cent of the total population in Mexico. It is also in this social group that the most extreme cases of poverty and neglect can be found. In this respect, there are two declared *autonomous zones* in
Mexico that can be explained as the response to such state neglect and abuse. One is in the southern state of Chiapas in the Zapatista territory, while the other is located in the state of Oaxaca, where a faction of the Triqui community have declared autonomous social, political, and territorial status since 2006. For this Triqui community attacks and aggression are a constant fact of life.

On other fronts the situation is no more encouraging, and telecommunications is a good example. In 2005, 18.4 per cent of households owned a PC, amounting to roughly 3.8 million homes. Nevertheless, only 9 per cent, approximately 2.3 million households, had an Internet connection. Also in 2005, 64 per cent of the population had telephone access; 22 per cent with a fixed landline, 15 per cent with a mobile connection, and 26 per cent with both types. There is a very different picture regarding television ‘ownership,’ with 92.7 per cent of the population having access to TV.

These numbers have evidently changed since 2005. There is, however, a consideration that needs to be exposed. The polarisation in social capacity to acquire and use new communication technology at home (as revealed by the very low percentage of households with Internet connections) is staggering. The disparities in distribution have not, however, prevented specific sectors of the population from finding the means and access to use ‘new’ technologies, in particular the younger population. The fifteen to twenty-five years age group accounts for more than 35 per cent of the Internet users in Mexico. This group counters the difficulties of not having home access to the Internet and other communication technologies by finding access in alternative venues: at school, at work, with friends and relatives, or in Internet cafes.

**Mexican Neoliberal Social Assemblages**

The general situation in Mexico may be better understood if we think about the actual structures, assemblages, and conditions that rule the logic of power relations. In what follows I will describe and briefly analyse the main social assemblages constituting contemporary Mexico, namely the government, the private sector, and civil society and society at large.

It can be suggested that since the 1980s Mexico has become a neoliberal regime. The assemblages described below are the structures, the organisations where policies and laws are planned and enforced. In this regard it can be assumed that for many organisations neoliberal practices are a necessary component of the system. The most powerful assemblages in Mexico share the neoliberal conviction that economic growth, in particular macroeconomic growth, is needed to address problems of poverty, as it is the only way to produce wealth which can be invested in development. The Mexican government, like many other countries’ governments, has followed the suggestions of international financial institutions like the World Bank and the
International Monetary Fund. The results of such actions are discussed below. I also include a
general description of the private sector in Mexico and its most powerful assemblages. This will
help to understand the great power which the broadcast industries exercise in Mexico. Finally, a
description of civil society completes the general picture of the main social assemblages in
contemporary Mexico.

Mexican Government Social Assemblage
Those component parts that constitute the more complex assemblage known as the Mexican
government include, but are not limited to: political parties, political elites, bureaucracy, the army,
the members of the executive, legislative and judicial powers, official buildings, and government
patrimony (e.g. state owned companies). The three main components of the Mexican government
are the executive, the legislative, and the judicial institutional organisations. These three social
assemblages are constituted by bureaucracy but are also fed by the activity of political parties, for
example, the president or other positions subject to electoral processes.

Beyond political parties and government institutions, the military and the police force are
also considered component parts constitutive of the Mexican nation state and government.
Furthermore, the military and police assemblages in Mexico play a role in setting the intensity of
the violence experienced in the country. It can be suggested that in the case of Mexico, the Army
and the Navy actually enjoy some respect and recognition from the general population, in contrast
to the police forces, who suffer from a low rate of acceptance. The police system in Mexico may be
regarded as one of the best examples of a corrupt institution with a poor performance regarding the
duties assigned to it by the Mexican political system.

The military and police assemblages are not, however, the main assemblages triggering
violent processes and events at the personal scale. For example, organised crime has become so
powerful that it can compete for the monopoly over violence held by federal and local governments
in Mexican territories, and gives to the violence experience a particular form and consequences
different to the violence engaged in by military and police forces. Other types of violence, like
domestic violence exacerbated by negative social and personal conditions, can also be considered a
factor that support processes of actualisation of the global problematic and its diagrams of violence.

Executive and Legislative Power
The presidential office is the expression of the executive power branch in the Mexican government.
It is the social assemblage with the greatest authority in the territory. It relates to other assemblages
at the highest space scale of social dimensions: the international and the national scales. In the
political power structure of Mexico there is no Prime Minister or Vice President. This aspect of the Mexican government assemblage means that the Presidential figure carries a great deal of political power. Presidentialism is the term coined to describe this aspect of contemporary Mexican politics, and major changes in Mexican politics cannot be explained without considering it (5).

In this regard, 2000 marked a historical shift in Mexican modern politics. Since the conclusion of the Social Revolution of 1921, Mexico had been ruled by one political party, the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) (Institutional Revolutionary Party), a political system that might be comparable on some levels with the one party in China or the politburo in the Soviet Union, but with regular elections and a capitalist, non-communist international outlook. The PRI ruled for almost eighty years, making it a political power structure with one of the longest runs in the twentieth century. The elites forming the main interpersonal networks constituting the revolutionary family lost political power in 2000, when the conservative Partido Acción Nacional (PAN) (National Action Party) won the elections. Despite the feeling of general disappointment that has accompanied more recent political developments, the democratic alternation from the formerly hegemonic PRI to an allegedly more democratic PAN has historical proportions.

The Chamber of Senators (Cámara de Senadores) and the Chamber of Deputies (Cámara de Diputados) are two social assemblages working in a synthetic way to constitute what can be understood as the Mexican Congress. They hold the legislative power. This system of political social assemblages is replicated in every Mexican state (Republic), and has the same functions (legislation) as, but in a different space scale than, the national congress. In terms of the constitution of the Mexican government assemblage, it can be said that political parties are the unit of assemblage formation.

Judicial Power

The Mexican Supreme Court is in charge of enforcing the laws provided by the legislative power, as well as administering justice at national, regional, and local scales. Within the judicial power branch rests one of the most important social assemblages suffered and ‘enjoyed’ by society: the police. The bodily and material nature of the exteriority capacity of the police assemblage makes it of special interest for social assemblage theory.

The police force is one of the most effective social assemblages in destroying, deterritorialising, or chaoticising other constituted social assemblages. In a dangerous multifaceted way, this social assemblage can destroy assemblages of organised crime, as well as unarmed, peaceful organisations and groups of society, similar to a dictatorship. The exteriority capacity of the social assemblage of the police force is the same – whether acting against organised crime or
peaceful social assemblages – in terms of its capacity to deterritorialise, destroy, and chaoticise. What defines the ‘target’ is instead the inner logic and purpose – the teleology – set up within the confines of the police force itself. Here, the role of ethics is important to explain the function and the validity of a social assemblage with the capabilities of the police. In the particular case of Mexico, the police assemblage deserves attention because of its effects of creating a rather negative appearance and projection onto Mexican society.

In terms of its exteriority relations with other social assemblages within Mexican territories, the activity of the Mexican government should provide them with legitimacy within the Mexican social context. This may well be the most important effect, since the judicial, legislative, and executive assemblages may act as ‘government’ within national territory: providing legitimacy to identified social assemblages and enforcing certain prerogatives and rights associated with this recognition. In theory, the Mexican government aims at enforcing the state of law with justice.

The Mexican government also has the authority to administer the wealth of the country and organise the different markets and public finances in the territory. This endorses great power to the government assemblage considering that money – and the economic power invested in it – is itself a powerful assemblage, thus enabling certain actions instead of others, influencing the nature of power relations in Mexican territories. Money can make things more difficult or easier depending on the terms of the relations which a social assemblage maintains with the government invested with authority at the national and local scales, and therefore with the economic power to move things on.

**The Private Sector Social Assemblage**

In Mexico, the private sector enjoys a great deal of power. This social assemblage is of great relevance in neoliberal Mexico because of its links to, and dependency on, money and the production of goods and services. The private sector can be regarded as the engine of the modern capitalist nation state, to use Tehranian and Tehranian’s (1995) idea. The units of assemblage formation of the complex private sector social assemblage are the factory, company, business, bank, and entrepreneur. This sector is constituted by a variety of forms to make business. However, all of these forms share the logic of exchange and production dictated by capitalist ideologies and aims (competition and gains).

Similar to the government social assemblage, the private sector controls important amounts of national wealth and money. Regardless of the dispersed character of the private sector, it involves organisations that agglutinate their interests in common grounds, thus enabling the private sector to form more complex synthetic wholes. One of the most prominent social assemblages
representing the joint interests and desires portrayed by the private sector in Mexico is the *Consejo Coordinador Empresarial* (CCE) (Entrepreneurial Coordinating Council). This social assemblage has great influence and close ties with the government assemblage. In particular, this organisation had significant influence during the neoliberal shift in the 1980s and 1990s. The influence of the CCE continues to be crucial for Mexican political, economic, and social development, as well as in (dis-)agreements.

The CCE is made up of many different organisations. There are, however, seven organisations or component parts that enjoy a voice and a vote within the overall structure.

1. *Confederación de Cámaras Industriales de los Estados Unidos Mexicanos* (CONCAMIN). In this chamber some of the most important sectors linked to the private sector social assemblage can be found. For example, the chamber of cement, the chamber of beer producers, the chamber of paper, the chamber of the construction industry, the chamber of editorial companies, the chamber of pharmaceuticals, and so on. When all these relatively minor social assemblages come together and synthesise their aims under the CONCAMIN, they gather the strength to affect power relations in the Mexican context.


3. Employers Confederation of the Mexican Republic (COPARMEX).

4. Banks Association of Mexico (ABM). This organisation controls the institutions in charge of providing credit to business and private entities in Mexico. Its importance should not be ignored in terms of the relevance it has to influence the national and international economic profile of Mexico.

5. Mexican Council of Businessmen (CMHN). This organisation gathers the most powerful individuals of the private sector in Mexico. The influence of this organisation in Mexican development is undisputed; however, it is also unclear because of the nature of secrecy and closure in which this organisation conducts its activity (6).


There are, of course, other organisations associated to the CCE, but which do not enjoy power in the council’s decision making. There are also many other assemblages that congregate the interests of the private sector in Mexico, but the aforementioned ones may be the most powerful in challenging or maintaining the status quo of power relations that the private sector holds with
government assemblages and society at large. This means that the private sector is able to synthesise its organisations to form a more complex and powerful assemblage to deal with government and other social assemblages. The relations between these three differentiated social assemblages (government, private sector, and the social sector) will be explained in the following sections, where specific practices and actions between and among these assemblages will be highlighted and analysed.

Organised Civil Society and Society at Large
Organised civil society in Mexico is a social assemblage of a more recent creation; however, the focus on social organisation has been around for a much longer period, and takes relevance for the present research during the mid-1980s, when social organisation in a more contemporary form gained importance within the context of other social assemblages. The 1980s were marked by two specific events which triggered initiatives that emerged solely from civil society. First, the continuous and poignant economic and social crises experienced in Mexico since the external debt crisis of 1982, and second, the 1985 earthquakes coupled with the incapacity of the government to properly handle the crisis unleashed by this catastrophe.

I will return to these two events later on, but at this point it is necessary to draw a distinction, when referring to civil society as a social assemblage, between what I refer to as rich civil society and regular civil society. The notion of civil society organisation has been articulated by different groups and therefore has been mobilised for different aims and with distinct intentions. There are fundamental differences between rich civil society with clear philanthropic intentions, as is the case of large companies or corporations such as Fundación Televisa, Fundación Telmex, or Vamos Mexico, and regular civil society organisations that need private, public, or community subsidies in order to engage in their activities, such as El Barzón, LaNeta, and Fundación Renacimiento.

If political parties are the unit of assemblage formation of the Mexican government assemblage, the unit of assemblage formation in society at large is a civil network or organisation. The power relations established among the social assemblages mentioned above (government, private sector, social sector) characterise and shape the identity of the Mexican nation state. In this regard, it should be recalled that during the last three decades the institutions and organisations of the Mexican government have shifted from a nationalist system of organisation towards a consolidated neoliberal system. Mexican administrations transitioned from a nationalistic model based on market regulation and protection towards one of neoliberal privatisation, a move towards free market economy led by a group of technocrats that have been in the government since the
The technocratic change in the government assemblage inevitably produced and forced change in the assemblages of the private sector and civil society organisation. In Mexico the rules of the game and the social contract changed under the paradigm of globalisation and neoliberalism. For example, important post revolutionary achievements, products of the revolution of 1910, were transformed in order to fit neoliberal conditions. One case in point is Carlos Salinas de Gortari’s decision to reform article 27 of the constitution regarding land rights and property. This reform was one of the reasons used by the EZLN revolutionary movement in Chiapas to justify their cause.

**Instability, Polarisation, and Communication**

The shape and identity of the Mexican technolinguistic social assemblage has been changing over the last three decades. Recurrent political and economic crises have played an important role in this process. Several ‘episodes’ in recent Mexican history account for processes of political and economic instability and socio-economic polarisation that have revolved or convoluted the order and the established organisation among social assemblages. Furthermore, for each crisis and event of instability and polarisation there is also the possibility of the intensification of the experience of the global problematic. Chronic crises are characteristic of the modern Mexican nation state, and this has shaped the capabilities of the national technolinguistic social assemblage during contemporary globalisation.

The following section provides a brief background on the social, political, and economic situation in Mexico, starting with the economic crisis of 1982. The aim is to overlap the processes of instability and polarisation generated by these crises with the public, private, and social communication conditions that have shaped the Mexican technolinguistic social assemblage. There are four particular political and economic crises that are crucial in the analysis of the relationships between communication technologies and the global problematic, manifested as political and economic instability and social polarisation. The first is the economic crisis of Mexican external debt and the nationalisation of the banking system, unleashed in 1982. The second is the political and economic crisis of 1988, after Carlos Salinas de Gortari took the presidential office following alleged electoral fraud. The third is the economic crisis of 1994 that triggered the internationally known Efecto Tequila, more locally known as Error de Diciembre. The last is the political crisis suffered in Mexico during the electoral process of 2006.

Despite the fact that these crises resulted from different causes and are rather specific in nature, they are, unfortunately, recurrent phenomena in Mexican national politics and economics. Such phenomena usually result from the personal or group interests linked to acts of political and
industrial corruption, lack of planning, or the sum of these elements added with disadvantageous international conditions. For instance, high international interest rates or instability in the international oil market usually have serious consequences in Mexican politics and economics. These crises have shaped Mexico’s recent history and do not respond to isolated actions. Nevertheless, it is possible to describe some of the conditions in determinate space scales, and how these processes have enforced the vulnerability of national sovereignty and, to a certain extent, society at large.