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The Peculiarities of 'Transition' *a la Mexicana*

Laurence Whitehead

Laurence Whitehead is an Official Fellow in Politics at Nuffield College, Oxford University. He also does graduate teaching in contemporary Latin American politics and economic policy at Oxford's Latin American Centre. He is a member of the Joint Committee on Latin American Studies of the ACLS/SSRC in New York, and directs a research project for them on the interactions between economic and political liberalization. Together with Guillermo O'Donnell and Philippe Schmitter he edited *Transition from Authoritarian Rule and Prospects for Democracy in Latin America and Southern Europe*, published in 4 volumes in 1986 by the Johns Hopkins University Press. He is also the editor of a forthcoming Oxford University Press book series, "Studies in Democratization."

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I. Introduction

The 1917 Mexican Constitution was an advanced liberal democratic charter. Enacted in the course of civil war and revolutionary upheaval, it held out the promise of a highly federalist republic, the conventional threefold division of powers, civilian control over the military, regular contested elections to all public offices at both state and federal levels, and a full range of political and civic rights for the citizenry as a whole. In at least two respects it offered a more advanced form of 'democracy' than other liberal charters of the time, "considerando la democracia no solamente como una estructura jurídica y un régimen político, sino como un sistema de vida fundado en el constante mejoramiento económico, social y cultural del pueblo" (Art. 3). It specified fuller social rights (agrarian and labor rights, restraints on the privileges of property, although private ownership was protected); and it elaborated on safeguards against personal rule behind a constitutional façade. In the best tradition of late nineteenth century liberalism it also emphasized the separation of church and state, and the promotion of a secular society. Of course, in 1917 these were only programmatic norms, far removed from existing realities, but they constituted a blueprint for a future sociopolitical order which, if put fully into operation, would become a model democracy based on the most up-to-date and socially progressive (mostly liberal) ideas of the period.

It is under this constitution that Mexico has been governed continuously for the past seventy-seven years. Many of the provisions that seemed the most visionary at the time they were drafted have been turned into reality to a remarkable degree (subordination of the military, secularization of education, land reform, and strict observance of the electoral calendar). The authorities would certainly recognize, however, that the task of democratic construction remains incomplete. The electoral process still needs perfecting, for example, and new proposals are regularly under consideration to increase the political space available to lawfully registered opposition parties (currently, e.g., to ensure multiparty representation in the Senate, to improve opposition access to the media during election campaigns, to redress imbalances in the financing of political parties, and to establish a special office for the prosecution of electoral crimes). But defenders of the existing system would still argue that to label Mexico an 'authoritarian regime,' perhaps at last on the brink of a 'transition to democracy,' would be to bracket it with enormously dissimilar experiences elsewhere, to deny the huge strides already made towards a modern democracy, and to disregard the precious opportunities for further incremental progress within the existing institutional framework. In more candid moments recent defenders of the status quo have been inclined to argue for the need to balance the Constitution's commitment to representative democracy against the equally valid claims of social incorporation and economic

progress. Arguing along these lines, President Carlos Salinas de Gortari has tended to claim that economic reform should take precedence over political reform; and candidate Colosio seemed inclined to present himself as the guarantor of social reforms that could be jeopardized through political adventurism. It remains to be seen whether candidate Ernesto Zedillo's rhetorical shift to giving priority to democracy will turn out to represent a durable change of emphasis.

As is well known, on 1 January 1994 the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN) seized half a dozen municipalities in the southern border state of Chiapas, among other things, calling on the Congress and the Judiciary to depose the illegitimate president, Carlos Salinas de Gortari. In contrast to the Marxist programs espoused by all Latin American guerrilla movements of the 1970s and 1980s (which bypassed Mexico), the EZLN placed the progressive liberal ideals associated with the 1917 Constitution at the heart of its appeal. Its claim, dramatized by the ensuing military repression, that in Chiapas and elsewhere "there were no conditions for free and democratic elections" combined with its invocation of such national archetypes as the exploited Indian and the ruthless oligarchy, shattered the Salinista image of modern Mexico. After a brief hesitation the President sacked his Secretary of Government and sent out a peace commissioner to parley. Congress was to be called into extraordinary session to legislate an emergency package of political and constitutional reforms (the third in four years) aimed at deflecting national and international censure of the Salinas administration for its illiberal (i.e. antidemocratic and antipopular) characteristics. The hypersensitivity of the authorities reflects their sense of exposure and vulnerability to criticism, rather than mere generosity of spirit. Survey data indicate widespread popular sympathy for the EZLN's critique (even though most Mexicans are understandably anxious about the use of violence). International media attention reinforces this perception of Salinas' Mexico. In 1993 the farsighted economic reformer was leading Mexico into full membership in the 'First World.' As of New Year's Day 1994, an incumbent who probably acquired office through electoral fraud seemed to be struggling to conceal his divorce from many of the strongest traditions. (As Secretary for Education, Zedillo was responsible for a controversial and frustrated attempt to rewrite the official text books used to teach Mexican history, downplaying nationalist traditions which might stain the country's 'First World' credentials.)

Thus, in the opinion of some critics of the system (an opinion popularized by the Chiapas rebels) for most of this century the Mexican regime has in reality been '*una dictadura perfecta*,' sheltering behind a constitutional façade. This authoritarian regime was not so rash as to expose itself to public view like the military rulers of South America, or the communists of Eastern Europe, or the Iberian personalist dictators. In this sense it was, in Mario Vargas Llosa's shocking phrase, a more 'perfect' dictatorship, well camouflaged and therefore capable of adapting and surviving behind a shield of orchestrated liberalism after the others had foundered. But according to such critics there should be no illusion that this was a genuinely democratic political regime, or that it

could just imperceptibly edge forward towards democracy without any real discontinuity, or 'transition.'

In response to these criticisms, and in an implicit shift of emphasis from the priorities of his predecessor and mentor, President Salinas, the 1994 presidential candidate of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) declared that "I do not believe that the country can advance significantly in the economic or social areas if we do not strengthen our democracy." Dr. Ernesto Zedillo Ponce de Leon added that "people are demanding more democracy."¹ Former US Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs, Bernard Aronson, reinforced the point in somewhat blunter language the next day, when he wrote that "to insure stability, Mexico must evolve rapidly from a one-party system dominated by a powerful president into a full-fledged multi-party democracy with an independent congress, judiciary and state and local governments."² Thus, in the wake of the Chiapas rebellion and the assassination of PRI candidate, Luis Donaldo Colosio, key public figures in both Mexico and the United States made rather explicit promises of rapid progress in the direction of democratization. Indeed the timetable for living up to these statements is remarkably tight. Such official democratizing rhetoric will face a major reality test in the 21 August 1994 federal elections for the Presidency and Congress. With the campaign still in its early stages, and with still unresolved uncertainties, both about the sociopolitical climate in general, and the precise institutional rules of the contest in particular, it would be premature to judge at this stage the true substance behind these declaratory statements, or to predict the most probable outcome. However, it is already possible to reflect on how much a prospective political opening in Mexico would be likely to resemble, or differ from, preceding 'transitions from authoritarian rule' in Latin America and elsewhere, and what the distinctive features of the Mexican experience could imply for the course and content of a hypothetical 'democratic transition' there.

This paper starts by considering what is most distinctive about the established 'PRI system' of government, as compared to more standard variants of authoritarian rule. It then reflects on the notion of 'transition' and its applicability in contemporary Mexico. There follows a discussion of the prospective sources of 'regime breakdown' and a consideration of how well the Mexican system is defended against these dangers. Clearly neither Ernesto Zedillo nor Bernard Aronson wish to encourage any form of regime breakdown, and indeed the theoretical alternative of achieving 'democratization by stealth' (i.e. through nondisruptive incremental reforms) also requires consideration. Despite the eminence of those who advocate this theoretical alternative, and the breadth of the interests that would be served if it could be realized, this paper gives

1 As quoted in the *International Herald Tribune*, 11 April 1994.

2 As quoted in the *New York Times*, 20 April 1994. Aronson added that "the US must come down squarely—but carefully—in support of democratization. The US should strongly support independent oversight and make it clear privately that our judgment of the outcome will be decisively guided by the observers' verdict."

various reasons for skepticism about the scope for achieving a genuine democratic transition entirely through a process of gradualistic evolution, even in the unusual and distinctive context of the Mexican political system. Those most accustomed to (impressed by) that system generally suspect that it still retains such a formidable adaptive capacity, that an emphasis on 'nondisruptive' change will in practice serve to deflect pressures for democratization and to camouflage continuation of an essentially authoritarian (perpetually 'pretransition') regime. While acknowledging the weight of history and 'political culture' behind this interpretation, this paper takes seriously the concerns voiced by Zedillo, Aranson, and many others, and concludes that the realistic observer of Mexico should pay due attention to the possibility of a much more accelerated shift towards democracy.

II. The *Sui Generis* Character of Authoritarian Rule in Mexico

In political terms it falls to the Mexican people, rather than to foreign observers, to adjudicate between these conflicting arguments, which could well help to shape the campaign for the presidential and congressional elections scheduled for 21 August 1994. From an academic perspective, this paper seeks to situate the Mexican experience within the framework provided by the comparative study of contemporary democratizations. The Mexican experience can also be used to probe the scope and limitations of such frameworks.

Since 'democracy' and 'authoritarian rule' are not just descriptive but also evaluative categories, charged with strong positive and negative connotations respectively, it is unsurprising that in Mexico (as elsewhere) they have become 'essentially contested' concepts. This paper broadly endorses the dominant current of political interpretation which classifies the party-state regime that has ruled Mexico continuously since 1929 as an 'authoritarian' regime. However, as suggested in the introduction, there is room for debate about how well, and in precisely what ways this terminology fits the Mexican case. In this section the object is not to condemn the PRI regime, or to impose language which prejudices its scope for reform from within. Rather, the aim is to identify the strategic singularities of the Mexican variant of authoritarian rule, in order to establish how far it differs from other authoritarian regimes, and then to deduce the implications of these distinctive characteristics for any prospective regime transition or transformation.

The term 'political regime' denotes a defined set of institutions and 'rules of the game' which regulate the access to, and uses of, positions of public authority in a given society. A regime can be said to persist, or to reproduce itself, so long as the inevitable changes in institutions and rulers which occur over time come about incrementally and without changing the basic principles of the system. A 'transition' from one regime to another concerns the set of interacting changes arising when basic operating principles are changed. What, in any concrete

case, constitutes incremental development *within* a regime, as opposed to basic change *between* regimes is not always self-evident. However, in abstract, the basic operating principles of authoritarian rule are clearly distinct from those of democracy.

Mexico's formal political institutions can be largely traced back to the 1917 Constitution, but the informal 'rules of the game' crystallized quite a bit later. This informal system is closely associated with the establishment of a unified and disciplined governing party, which derived its resources and discipline from its exclusive control over the state apparatus. But whether we date the current Mexican regime back to 1917 or only to 1929 (or even, in its finished form, to the 1940s) one critical distinguishing feature is its remarkable and unbroken *longevity*; and a second is its unusually strong *institutionalization*. These features have powerful implications for any prospective transition to a regime based on alternative principles. For this long-lasting and well-institutionalized regime has also secured effective *legitimation*.

The basic principle underlying the PRI regime was that it derived its right to rule from military and political victories secured through the Mexican revolution. Thus, it enjoyed revolutionary legitimacy, it identified itself with the state and the nation, and it secured a mass popular base by administering social reforms traceable to the insurgency. Over time other potentially competing principles of legitimation (national conciliation, socioeconomic modernization) became increasingly distinct as they were officially invoked to reinforce, or even displace, these initial justifications. But the six-year presidential cycle lent flexibility to the PRI regime, so that these shifts in justification could occur without involving any open repudiation of the regime's foundational principles. However, since the mid-1980s the switch from earlier to later forms of justification has proceeded at an accelerating pace, a disjuncture which the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) has come to symbolize, in the eyes of many. Following the liberal provisions of the 1917 Constitution the regime has also always claimed an electoral mandate, but this has long been a contested arena, and until recently it was a secondary consideration in the regime's armory of legitimizing self-justification.

Popular sovereignty provides, in essence, an entirely distinct set of principles for the foundation of a political regime. Elsewhere in Latin America, both Bolivia and Nicaragua have shifted from regimes founded on the principle of revolutionary legitimacy to regimes founded on the principle of popular sovereignty. So also, it might be argued, have a number of ex-communist countries in Eastern Europe, and also certain countries which had experienced 'counterrevolutionary' legitimation following the defeat of communists in civil wars (Spain, Taiwan, South Korea). Thus comparative experience suggests that under certain conditions regimes with origins comparable to those of Mexico (i.e. the products of military conflict) can shift to full electoral democracy, and that it is not unusual for the individuals and parties that held power during the

period of revolutionary legitimation to do well under conditions of popular sovereignty.³ However, comparative experience also indicates that such shifts do require an explicit 'transition' from one set of operating principles to another. Nowhere else have they occurred without a considerable degree of rupture, and except after intervening periods of uncertainty and renegotiation of foundational procedures. Moreover, in every case there was a severe impact on some substantial interests which had grown up under the shelter of the predemocratic regime, together with considerable turbulence and realignment of personnel within the political elite. The fundamental reason why 'transition' and its attendant risks and uncertainties proved unavoidable in all these cases is that popular sovereignty had to be demonstrated and asserted as prevailing over earlier principles of legitimacy. The shift could not simply be taken on trust, and the rival principles could not blur imperceptibly into one another, for in that event the electorate would continue to feel itself disempowered. Only by means of some high profile act of political theatre could the voters be convinced that henceforth (in contrast to earlier periods) their autonomous choices would be heeded. Only through some open process of political confrontation could the losing sectors associated with the predemocratic regime be forced to relinquish their claims to authority.

In Mexican conditions, the shift from *dedazo* (hand-picked) to *sufragio efectivo* (popularly-elected candidates) would be bound to involve a major discontinuity of attitudes and practices both within the ruling elite and across the electorate. Judgments about just how destabilizing such a shift would be bring us back from legitimation to institutionalization. In one view, a regime with a very strong institutional base should be better placed to manage the transition from one set of governing principles to another without undue dislocation. However, this assumes that the institutions in question provide a relatively neutral framework for containing political change. In the Mexican case the institutions of government are not only long established and well developed, they are also profoundly penetrated by the PRI system of authoritarian rule. Thus a major shift in the principles of legitimation could not simply be contained within the existing neutral institutions of the state. It would require a far-reaching restructuring of those institutions, arguably to recuperate their original functions, but in any case to durably recast their current modes of operation. One has only to reflect on the rubber stamp attributes of the Congress or the submissiveness of the judiciary to see the scale of the transformations that would be required.

³ Such comparative analysis requires a separate paper. The cases cited are diverse, and those from outside Latin America concern regimes arising from the military victories of regular armies, often with large scale external support. In such cases the West's success in the Cold War goes far towards explaining the democratization. The Latin American cases concern domestically driven social revolutions, where the victorious forces were largely nonprofessional and popular nationalism was strong. Both in Bolivia and in Nicaragua democratization required the conversion of 'historic' leaders of the revolution (Paz Estenssoro and Ortega), who had to be persuaded that more could be rescued through compromise than by intransigence.

This long and strong interpenetration between the informal rules underpinning the dominant party system and the formal processes that characterize the constitutionally established institutions has ambivalent implications for Mexico's transition prospects. On the one hand it means that there are effectively no institutions with a credible claim to full impartiality, (i.e. autonomous enough to stand beyond and above the influence of the *Presidente de turno*). Neither the Federal Electoral Commission nor the Supreme Court, nor the Minister of Defense, nor the Papal Nuncio can be regarded as an untainted authority capable of serving as a trustworthy 'bridge' between the present authoritarian regime and any prospective successor.⁴ But equally on the other hand, it also means that the Mexican variant of authoritarian rule involves far more acceptance of the disciplines arising from formal rules and procedures than is found in less institutionalized (or more arbitrary) authoritarian regimes.

In important respects Mexican politics functions under an effective 'rule of law' rather than just the arbitrary rule of men. This may seem a surprising claim, given the enormous discretionary power concentrated in the person of the president, the prevalence of impunity for those in the inner circle, and the notorious deficiencies of the Mexican legal system. But, in contrast to other authoritarian regimes, there are some essential respects in which even the most powerful political figures in Mexico are subject to the discipline of impersonal rules they cannot vary. The 'no reelection' principle that became entrenched following the assassination of Obregón after 1928 provides a prime example of this. Neither the president of the Republic nor the state governors, nor the members of congress can stand for reelection at the expiration of their respective terms. In fact ex-presidents (who are typically only about fifty years old when they leave office) are expected to spend the rest of their lives in near political purdah. After monopolizing so much authority for six years they know they will not be entrusted with anything but the most token public responsibilities thereafter. In a similar way on the electoral front the '*calendario fijo*' (set schedule) of polling dates for federal office can hardly be varied—it is about as rhythmic and predictable as the US electoral calendar, whereas most other Latin American countries (both authoritarian and democratic) are constantly tampering with their political timetables in pursuit of short-term partisan advantage.

The strong institutionalization of the Mexican political system provides a major potential barrier against certain of the manifestations of 'plebiscitarian' instability encountered elsewhere,

4 Nor, of course, is there a hereditary ruling family, or an eminent cohort of political exiles awaiting the opportunity to return, or an external association of democratic nations such as the European Community, available to broker and facilitate a transition, as in other countries. Indeed the Mexican system has been systematically organized to resist any such intrusion from outside on the grounds that they might be appropriate by counterrevolutionary forces. However, under NAFTA the US Congress has just acquired some incipient institutional leverage. NAFTA also narrows the margin of political discretion in economic policy management available to successive presidents.

and in principle it might also be expected to provide a promising basis for the subsequent strengthening of a more democratic institutionality, as such impersonal rules are extended to control a wider range of undemocratic practices. This is a key element in official arguments for 'democratization by stealth,' or the incremental introduction of successive measures of political reform strengthening electoral oversight, extending multiparty competition to new arenas, improving the balance of coverage in the media, etc. This approach focuses overwhelmingly on the formal rules of the political process, assuming that informal structures of authoritarian practice can be gradually rolled back without destabilizing the whole system. Since Mexico has long secured its regime against the insubordination of the military, against *autogolpes* (self-coups), and against prorogation, why not simply establish equally effective politico-institutional barriers against electoral fraud, judicial subservience, and congressional abdication of responsibility?

What such official arguments for nondisruptive and incremental political reform tend to overlook, however, is the fact that although the Mexican regime *is* strongly institutional, and is *sui generis*, it is also and in its own distinctive way, deeply authoritarian. The strong and impersonal rules that have been enforced were those that best served to stabilize and perpetuate this regime. In particular they were rules that guaranteed elite circulation on a regular and frequent basis, thus providing strong incentives for the pursuit of political ambitions from *within* the established structure. The necessary counterpart of this was, however, the maintenance of equally strong disincentives to challenges from *without*. This is the 'authoritarian' counterpart to the 'institutionalization,' and the two elements are united in a single system. The strong interpenetration of formal and informal rules created a stable and predictable regime that did not need to practice too much open repression, because the disciplines were so well understood and internalized. But any attempt to operate as though only the incentives to cooperation were required and to disengage from the harsher aspects of the disincentives to defiance would tend to destabilize the authoritarian system. Concretely, if electoral transparency and judicial and congressional authority were to be made as impersonal and reliable as the 'no reelection' rule, the entire system would be transformed. It would then need to function according to a different logic. Likewise, attempts to reshape the formal rules in such a way that they directly clash with deeply entrenched, informal power structures are likely to produce unforeseen and undesired results (e.g. Colosio's insistence on transferring the governorship of Baja California to the victorious Partido Acción Nacional [PAN] candidate in 1989 was evidently an unacceptable breach of these informal rules so far as the members of Todos Unidos Contra Acción Nacional [TUCAN] were concerned). Comparing the basic logic of liberal democracy (division of powers, no prescriptive rights of incumbents, etc.) with the basic design of the Mexican system, it would be truly remarkable if the latter were to shade into the former without disruption.

For example, one reason why the no reelection rule is so rigidly upheld is that the counterpart of *sufragio efectivo* is known to be a pretense. Once genuine confidence in the honesty and durability of the electoral process had been established, it would become possible (and indeed logical) to relax the strictness of the no reelection provision. If the voters were sovereign they could choose a congress which might serve as a genuine counterweight to the decisions of the executive. But if the congress were to play such a role it would need to develop a cadre of experienced parliamentarians. Under the no reelection rule as presently enforced, that is impossible, because every *diputado* leaves office after three years. Moreover, with no possibility of running for immediate reelection, existing congressmen have no incentive to cultivate the support of their constituents. This is just one example of how the different components of the Mexican system of institutional authoritarian rule are interconnected. Other equally clear examples can be found, for example, at the level of the state governors, or with regard to the justice system. If state governors felt that their first responsibility was to represent the views and interests of their respective electorates (rather than to defer to the *gran elector* in Los Pinos, who alone can nominate and dismiss them) state-federal relations would have to be transformed. Similarly, if members of the Mexican Supreme Court became more autonomous guardians of the rule of law (as has recently happened in Italy, or even as in contemporary Argentina) the entire presidentialist system of patronage, spoils, and impunity would require drastic revision. Major changes in any one of these areas would trigger a chain reaction of changes affecting the logic (and stability) of the system as a whole. If so, this is not a regime that can easily be transformed from authoritarian to democratic rule by stealth, and without visible discontinuities.

I make no apology for placing so much stress on the distinctively 'institutionalized' character of the authoritarian regime in Mexico even though it may seem to ignore the widespread objection that many transition studies overstress the 'top-down' elite interaction and formal rule-making aspects of regime change, to the neglect of bottom-up, civil-society based, and participatory aspects of democratization. In general this seems to me a false dichotomy, and in particular, Alan Knight has shown how far Mexican strategies of elite interaction need to be evaluated with due regard for the broader patterns of social incorporation which arose from the Mexican Revolution and which stabilized the postrevolutionary order.⁵ In any case, this characterization of the *sui generis* nature of Mexico's authoritarian regime would be radically incomplete if confined to formal institutional structures and to processes of political recruitment. The regime built itself not one but multiple, mass bases of support—through land reform and labor

5 Alan Knight, chapter on Mexico in R. Gunther and J. Higley, eds., *Elites and Democratic Consolidation in Latin America and Southern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992). As far back as 1980 I argued that Mexican elite unity was cemented by fear of uncontrollable pressures from below; see "Por qué México es casi ingobernable," *Revista Mexicana de Sociología* Vol XLII, No. 1 (Jan/March 1980).

incorporation; through promoting a national business class sheltered from foreign competition; and through a multifaceted and long-sustained cultural policy. If it was an 'institutionalized' and civilianized authoritarian regime, it was equally an 'inclusionary' authoritarian regime, and in all these respects it differed fundamentally from most of the other authoritarian regimes of Latin America.

Just as it is possible to unite 'institutional' and authoritarian characteristics in a tight, self-replicating political system, so it is also equally possible to unite 'inclusionary' strategies of mobilization and participation with authoritarian structures of decision making. This was the central concern of much of the literature on Mexican-style corporatism and on 'co-optation and control,' and it was the weak point of the system that was exposed in Mexico City at the time of the 1985 earthquake. Authoritarian control will always tend to conflict with the free expression of popular social aspirations, and despite its skill at containing such tensions, the Mexican regime proved unable to disguise this clash when that earthquake struck the capital. It can also be glimpsed intermittently (notably in Chiapas) beneath the benevolent and participatory surface of the Programa Nacional de Solidaridad (PRONASOL), which burgeoned under Salinas (and Colosio). In general, the whole system of inclusionary authoritarianism is also tightly integrated, so that the reform or democratization of a single component could not occur in isolation, but would trigger a chain reaction of readjustments. Imagine, for example, that Mexico's official labor bosses lost their corporatist near monopoly over worker representation—that they were required to compete for the allegiance of their members as private firms are now supposed to compete for customers. In such circumstances the entire system of popular representation (in Congress, in the parties, in the media, and even in the countryside) would be brought into question. The result *might* be a stable, inclusionary, democratic regime, although again this is not the assured outcome, and at best it could only be attained after considerable intervening turbulence.

III. A *Sui Generis* Transition?

The essential case for applying 'transition' analysis to Mexico is that, for all its distinctiveness and flexibility, the PRI system cannot be infinitely malleable or elastic. It has an underlying authoritarian logic, and can therefore be compared (and contrasted) with other authoritarian regimes, which either find ways to reproduce themselves (with their essentially authoritarian core intact) or which undergo regime 'breakdown' and transition to some alternative system of rules and norms. (The alternative *may* be some form of liberal democracy, though this is not necessarily the outcome, of course.) In the interval between the two systems there will be a transition or interregnum, during which the rules, norms, and identity of the key political players will be up for renegotiation. This is characteristically a limited period of heightened political

uncertainty. The extreme longevity of the Mexican regime and its inclusionary character, means that 'restoration' of an earlier model of democratic politics is not a possibility in this case. There can be no 'redemocratization,' as occurred in the Southern Cone, south European, and Baltic transitions.

The highly institutionalized system of political recruitment and rapid elite circulation means that any potential division of the ruling coalition with 'hardliners' and 'softliners' will tend to be more effectively limited and contained in Mexico than elsewhere. The Mexican formula of government routinely balances these two components, hardly ever allowing a complete takeover of policy by one element or the other. The pattern of rapid elite circulation means that when a particular policy stance has outlasted its usefulness and become an object of criticism and disunity, a new cohort of politicians can be drafted to vary the mix and re-create a belief in the possibilities of reform from within. Such incoming 'reformists' clearly understand that their mandate is to revivify the system, not dismantle it. (The recent trajectory of Manuel Camacho is eloquent in this regard. As the most prominent 'blando' in the Salinas administration, he has passed up at least two recent opportunities to construct a broad new 'democratizing' coalition outside the system. On both occasions he drew back from defecting, even though Salinas had just performed a nakedly authoritarian *dedazo*).

This same pattern creates distinctive and characteristic problems for the democratic opposition. Although opposing a repressive military regime may be dangerous and distressing, it has some advantages. The democrats are liable to feel that they have an unquestioned moral advantage that compensates for their physical vulnerability. Their unity and morale is often reinforced by the way their opponents respond under challenge. An important factor fueling democratic resistance is the conviction that however strong the regime looks, it is really brittle and has little capacity to reform itself. The Mexican regime concedes none of these advantages to its opponents. It strenuously avoids presenting an unambiguously repressive façade to the population at large (however intimidating it may choose to be in relation to targeted opposition groups). It is a past master in the use of 'safety valves' and diversionary tactics to blunt the force of an opposition attack. Divide and rule has been perfected as the technique for system maintenance, as demonstrated by the whole history of legal opposition parties in Mexico, and as confirmed by the current division of PAN from the Partido Revolucionario Democrático (PRD)—and within each of these groupings. Given this inheritance and the regime's unparalleled track record in co-opting key elements of the opposition (especially popular organizations with relatively urgent social demands that only the state can satisfy), it is very difficult for opposition leaders to maintain the confidence of their followers that with one or two more pushes the whole edifice will begin to tumble. The 'calendario fijo' offers very occasional opportunities (such as 1994) when such a claim may gain in credibility, but all the rest of the time it defends the regime from

destabilization, and stifles opposition energies. (Thus, for example, since 1988 the central strategic problem for the PRD has been that its appeal is centered on one main issue—democratization—which at best can only be brought to the fore for a brief few weeks once every six years, when the apostolic presidential succession comes up for electoral ratification. All the rest of the time [including the 1991 congressional elections] the PRI government has the initiative and can cater to a wide range of other political demands.)

At this point the conclusion might seem that no transition from authoritarian rule can be achieved in contemporary Mexico. Perhaps the system is so well defended, so capable of reproducing or reequilibrating itself, that we should only consider its capacity for gradual, internally-driven reform, and nothing else. In fact, ever since the mid-1980s there has been growing evidence that the regime has been encountering ever greater difficulties in preserving itself, and the events triggered by the Chiapas insurrection of New Years Day 1994 have rendered commonplace what was previously a controversial opinion. The assassination of PRI candidate Luis Donaldo Colosio on March 23rd only underscores the critical vulnerability of the old system of impositionism. Although these recent events reinforce the impression that some kind of transition is now on the cards in Mexico, we need to proceed with care in specifying the prospective dynamics given the *sui generis* features of the Mexican system outlined above.

IV. The Potential Sources of Regime Breakdown in Mexico

The 'transition' literature is often criticized for its lack of well specified 'theory.' Its account of regime breakdown tends to operate with an *ad hoc* range of contributory factors: it does not make clear how they are expected to combine; and it shies away from predictive statements. Those making such criticisms are, of course, welcome to develop more rigorous alternatives and to use them predictively. But, at least when considering the prospects for transition in contemporary Mexico, it is hard to see how anything more than a highly tentative and 'underdetermined' sketch of a possible regime breakdown can presently be assayed. It is easier to draw attention to certain rather broad and long-term processes of erosion, which have been weakening the foundations of the Mexican variant of authoritarian rule and intensifying pressures for liberalization, than to specify the relatively precise mechanisms by which an eventual breakdown and transition might be triggered. Indeed, it remains an open question whether the kind of liberalization experienced in Mexico necessarily reaches a point of no return (at which there must either be transition or clamp down) or whether it can continue indefinitely without loss of central control.

Given its distinctive structure, the Mexican regime was always secure against certain sources of breakdown that have been important elsewhere. It was never going to embark on a

military adventure that could expose it to external defeat. It was never going to become so identified with the personality of an individual ruler that its fate would become entangled with his biography. (This danger was perhaps at its greatest with Diaz Ordaz in 1968, but was quickly and effectively averted thereafter.) It would never allow itself to become the 'show case' for a US-sponsored democratization from without. Nor would it ever abdicate the domestic political space to a coalition of democratic challengers, whatever their composition. Such terrain would always be fiercely contested by the ruling party and/or its mass-based corporatist organizations. Naturally, if the ruling party were seriously to split, it would lose its assured ascendancy, but the PRI has been remarkably successful in maintaining its unity, in part, thanks to the glue of massive presidential patronage, but also because of a range of other unifying factors.

However, although all these points of potential vulnerability were well covered, the Mexican regime also had its own characteristic weak spots. The sexennial presidential succession is the prime weak point in the system, because at that moment all the authority and leadership capacity concentrated in that office must be transmitted, by an undisguisedly authoritarian mechanism, from one incumbent to the next, and the losing aspirants must be induced to acquiesce. This has been a source of danger to the system from its inception—as crises in 1935, 1940, and 1952 all testify. However, it became that much more critical in the 1980s, as first Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, and now apparently even Manuel Camacho, became dangerous potential defectors after their presidential ambitions had been thwarted. In major respects the regime's 'calendario fijo' serves to avert or diffuse instability and channel opposition into very narrow and predictable paths. But it also signifies that at the appointed moment in the political cycle there is no escaping an effectively constituted challenge. At that point the regime can no longer rely on all the defense mechanisms that keep it so well protected throughout the rest of its life. In the sexennial presidential contest, the system works best if the opposition can be induced into putting up enough of a fight to make the ruling party's victory look credible, but without ever shattering the illusion of the PRI's invulnerability. This obviously involves an extremely delicate balancing act, and the PRI has been fortunate that the PAN, the most longstanding opposition party, did for so long play its appointed role as required. However, in the 1970s the legal opposition was judged too weak to perform this function adequately; thus various reforms were introduced to enlarge and diversify it.

From the mid-eighties onwards, first the PAN and then the PRD began doing too well, and corrective measures were adopted to check this. But such fine tuning of the opposition by the government is another point of regime weakness, not of strength. It tends to expose the authoritarian core of the regime to public view, and is inherently both unstable and potentially counterproductive.

Linked to these two characteristic weak points of the PRI system is a third—the isolating and self-deceiving consequences of the regime's constant monologue with itself. This point has to be expressed with some care. Democratic regimes also orchestrate media debate to a considerable extent, and the Mexican press is not currently subject to anything like the crude censorship characteristic of most authoritarian regimes. Nevertheless, despite Mexican flexibility and 'limited pluralism,' official viewpoints normally dominate the media (especially television) to such an extent that the authorities periodically tend to deceive themselves and to screen out inconvenient 'feedback' from society. This is particularly characteristic of the middle years of each presidency, and of course when it works it adds to the efficacy of the system. But it is also a weak spot because periodically the official discourse falters, with highly unsettling effects. Very occasionally, as at the moment of the Mexico City earthquake, or in the days following the Chiapas rebellion, it becomes clear to all that the government's line has become entirely *hueca* (empty). There was also about a week following the assassination of Colosio during which confusion reigned at the centre of authority. More generally, each presidential election since 1976 has witnessed an abrupt collapse in the credibility of the official discourse (a collapse which is however reversed as soon as the new president assumes office).

Opinions will differ about the nature of the longer-term social processes at work which have tended to erode the bases of the PRI system. One could go back to 1968, and the emergence of a much better educated and more self-confident urban elite with illusions about the scope for easy democratic transformation through the empowerment of the next generation. (I would like to see a systematic comparison of Tlatlelolco and Tienanmen). The statism and economic interventionism of the 1970s can be viewed *either* as failed attempts to breathe new life into the old authoritarian model, *or* as necessary learning experiences through which a more autonomous and assertive market society gained self-organization. In any case, after the debt crisis the Mexican state's scope for relegitimation through economic expansion and interventionism was drastically curtailed, and in due course an alternative market-oriented formula of economic management has taken over. Whatever the justification for the change, in key respects it has weakened the social basis of the authoritarian rule. While the private sector and foreign investors have become empowered, the old corporatist structures have been undermined and deprived of resources, and 'popular sector' participation in PRI politics has contracted. Elite circulation encountered new difficulties because the requirements of 'market confidence' involve *continuismo* not only of policies, but also of personnel.

In addition to these material impediments to the continued good functioning of the authoritarian system, the shift to a neoliberal philosophy has also created a series of ideological problems for the regime. The governing coalition is no longer composed of groups more or less united in agreement that their right to rule emanates from an agreed revolutionary nationalist

project. Their commitment to necessary ruling myths has faded as the basis of their governing project has shifted. But that leaves them more isolated than before from prevailing attitudes in the society at large (their current embarrassment over the persisting attractions of the Zapatista myth is palpable). It also complicates the task of reconciling conflicting tendencies within the ruling group. Self-interest was never sufficient on its own to produce this degree of discipline and elite unity—it was always reinforced by some broader claims to legitimacy which are now open to dispute.

As is well known, there are conflicting interpretations of the role of NAFTA (or more generally of North American integration) as either a stimulus to the eventual democratization of Mexico, or perhaps as another economic project designed to substitute for overdue political reform. Part of this debate concerns the nature of the democratic outcome eventually envisaged, and part of it is linked to arguments about 'sequencing' (i.e., is it best to undertake economic reform first, in the belief that the conditions for democratic progress will be strengthened thereafter). Undoubtedly North American integration fits in with a series of other international developments (the discredit of Marxism, the worldwide resurgence of liberal democracies, etc.) all of which operate on the Mexican regime from without, reinforcing pressures on it either to democratize or at least to reequilibrate itself.

Briefly and provisionally, the main thrust of NAFTA is towards promoting the economic integration of Mexico into North America, which includes reinforcing and stabilizing the economic reform process and diminishing the risks of macro-policy instability and reversal. At the political level, this tends to favor broad support for the existing *status quo*, and no more than qualified support for democratization. Nondisruptive political reforms that can be viewed as stabilizing the regime are likely to be favored under NAFTA, but a high-uncertainty transition (a 'breakdown,' or 'democratic rupture') would not be welcome. Still, the direct political repercussions of NAFTA membership are mixed. The PRI regime would be mistaken to believe that the Treaty provides major and unqualified support to the existing political order. (Events such as the testimony of opposition figures before the US Congress and the increased salience of US media coverage of Mexican internal affairs should suffice to dispel any such illusions.) Insofar as NAFTA carried with it some implicit political conditionality it tends to strengthen the inducements to engage in broad-based political negotiations (e.g. over the pacification of Chiapas), and it raises the cost to the Mexican regime of any overt backsliding on political liberalization. Equally, the Cardenista opposition needs to recognize the mixed implications of NAFTA for its purposes. In the event of a Cardenista victory at the polls, North American integration may tend to discourage the PRI from resorting to overt fraud. It would also act as a further powerful constraint on the room for policy maneuver of the elected president (in addition to the constraint arising from his almost certain lack of a majority in Congress). It would be pure guesswork to say more at this stage, but in the event of a 'democratic rupture' in Mexico, NAFTA's rhetoric of liberalism and convergence would be

tested to the limit by the associated uncertainties and tensions of the transition. Although some pro-NAFTA commentators have stressed the positive political consequences of an integration process that strengthens an autonomous middle class in Mexico, it is equally true that the integration formula chosen in this case (in contrast to the European Community's approach) may also inflict considerable losses on major social interests which remain largely excluded from the benefits of the Mexican system and which may react to their exclusion in a politically destabilizing manner.

Most of what has been said so far concerns processes that potentially erode the long-term stability of the PRI regime. However, this leaves open the possibility that the governing elite, having time to see what is beginning and retaining the initiative, may produce responses which rescue the situation in some way or another. However, when the underlying supports of a regime are being eroded it becomes more vulnerable to certain 'trigger' events or processes that may accelerate its recomposition. Transition theorists have on the whole been reluctant to acknowledge the major role that political violence can play in this trigger stage. Recent events in Chiapas and Tijuana confirm that this is not an element that can be safely omitted from the analysis.⁶ The ruling elite's capacity to regain the initiative following an erosion of the social bases of the regime could well be drastically impaired by the disruptive impact of such calculated acts of political violence.

V. Stealth or Rupture?

It is not possible to predict with any degree of confidence either how long it will take for Mexico to undergo a transition from authoritarian rule, or what type of transition to expect. Nevertheless, we can draw some conclusions from the foregoing analysis about the main issues in contention, and the major respects in which a Mexican transition would be likely to differ from most others. This section reviews the arguments for and against the idea that the Mexican regime might achieve a gradual and incremental transition (democratization 'by stealth,' without the high levels of uncertainty and instability that have characterized processes of democratic 'rupture'). The key argument is that in such circumstances the transition would be very extended over time, with unresolved conflicts over when it started, when it ended, and what it amounted to. Although I

⁶ Spanish jurists working on Central America were scandalized to find that the assassin of Anastasio Somoza was celebrated in the Nicaraguan Constitution as a precursor of Sandinista democracy. But there is a case to be made that the December 1973 assassination of Admiral Carrero Blanco constituted an essential link in the chain of events leading to the consolidation of democracy in Spain. Considering the dangers inherent to such argumentation it is hardly surprising that political scientists downplay it. But from an analytical standpoint it requires attention. One interesting attempt in that direction is David E. Apter and Bruce Kapferer, eds., *The Legitimization of Political Violence* (forthcoming).

recognize that this is a possible scenario, and that a wide range of dominant interests both within and outside Mexico will be very anxious to ensure that any change of regime there is muffled and slowed down, I am skeptical whether such delaying tactics can permanently avert the momentum building up for a more discontinuous regime change. The final (more speculative) section therefore rehearses the arguments for expecting that in due course Mexico will undergo a relatively sharp period of 'rupture,' a destabilizing interregnum as the political system shifts from one underlying basis to another.

One major argument for stealth is that the ruling coalition in Mexico shows few signs of the kind of catastrophic loss of cohesion that have characterized most democratic ruptures. External defeat *à la* Greece, Portugal, or Argentina can be disregarded, not least because this is not a military regime. The collapse of self-confidence that shattered the communist party's will to rule in East Central Europe has yet to affect the core of the PRI regime. Moreover, even many opponents of the regime fear its abrupt disappearance. The strategy of the PAN is best understood as seeking a gradual transformation without risking a rupture of the institutional framework. Even the PRD gives indications that, although its demands for political change are unnegotiable, it recognizes the need to provide reassurances in other areas—regarding business confidence, institutional stability, and the international dimension.

One frequently observed method for limiting uncertainty during a regime transition is the establishment of a democratizing 'pact,' in which the contending forces agree on certain basic rules of the game. However, this paper's discussion of the *sui generis* nature of the Mexican regime highlights various impediments to such a solution in this case. The extreme longevity of the regime means that there are no 'bridging institutions' capable of guaranteeing such a pact. All the institutions that do exist are deeply implicated with the authoritarian system of rule. The opposition forces are divided and lack the autonomy and moral authority that would be needed to force a trustworthy and neutral agreement out of a slippery and devious administration. The Mexican regime has a long record of negotiating pacts—with labor and business, with opposition parties and with a wide range of social actors. But these have all been semi-imposed or officially orchestrated pacts, whereby those in power have exercised dominance, offering relatively secondary concessions to the weaker partners, but never putting the basic authority of the regime at risk. This pattern of semicorporatist pact making is so well established and so successful that it has created a set of attitudes and expectations that would tend to block all participants from engaging in genuine pluralist-style pact making. Mutual trust and recognition would be absent. The informal rules and implicit understandings that underpin the old PRI regime are not reformable by decree from above, but if they remain unchanged, then even the March 1994 package of political reforms (approved by Congress on the eve of Colosio's assassination) will not serve their stated purpose. It is, for this reason, much harder to dismantle and reshape strong institutions

(including electoral commissions, supreme courts, etc.) which are geared to partisanship than simply to create neutral new institutions where previous regimes of exception operated arbitrarily.

The case for transition by stealth is that the Mexican authoritarian regime does not recognize itself to have been defeated, nor does it acknowledge the existence of a democratic alternative with either the strength or the capacity to displace it.⁷ It *does* recognize the need for electoral credibility, and it may be willing to make a continuing sequence of concessions to carefully chosen critics in order to generate confidence that eventually political reforms will transform the system. Thus *some* opposition governors may be allowed to take office, minority representation in the Chamber can be extended to the Senate, domestic and foreign observers may be allowed to monitor the elections, and so forth. Concessions of this kind have been dribbling out over the last ten to fifteen years, and the transition-by-stealth perspective foresees further continuation of the process over another protracted period, until effectively (it is assumed) the authoritarian legacies of the past have all been gradually smoothed or negotiated away. Throughout any such process we must expect the authorities to announce that the Mexican transition has already effectively been accomplished, while the opposition struggles to keep alive the pressure for further reforms. According to one influential school of interpretation, the Mexican regime can more or less indefinitely maintain the initiative, launching controlled 'liberalization' measures one after the other, without ever being propelled into the fatal further step presupposed by the democratization literature—i.e. the point at which the consequences of liberalization escape official control and 'institutional uncertainty' concerning the election of the next government comes to prevail.

Opinions will differ about the viability of this option over the long run, but this scenario emerges quite plausibly from the way the Mexican regime has been characterized in this paper. If this is the way Mexican politics evolves, the 'transition' would be very extended (once the 1994 hurdle has been passed, there could be no further major opportunity for democratic 'rupture' before the year 2000). The authorities, still in control, could use all their formidable resources of persuasion to convince doubters that the transition had already been completed and, therefore, no further risks of instability should be countenanced. The democratic opposition would have to engage in a protracted and frustrating 'war of positions,' attempting to demonstrate that, on the contrary, the old authoritarian order had merely found new ways to disguise itself and perpetuate its ascendancy. The PRI regime could further extend the realm of 'limited pluralism' (e.g. encouraging a greater appearance of openness, and even uncertainty, concerning the legislative and judicial processes, as well as the intermittent recognition of selected opposition electoral

7 If democratic transition is explained as a 'second best' outcome selected when contending hegemonic forces find they have reached deadlock, then the Mexican regime is not yet resigned to a democratic stalemate.

victories), without necessarily relinquishing its hold on the presidency, or its chief executive's last-resort prerogatives of nomination and control. Thus, the political debate would continue to revolve around the unresolved question: What, in Mexican conditions, does a regime transition really amount to, when does it start and end, and how can we tell?

VI. The Possibility of a Democratic 'Rupture'

There is at least one alternative scenario, which is that the Mexican regime shifts to a clear, alternative basis of operation, under which 'sufragio efectivo' becomes accepted as the *ultima ratio* of political sovereignty. This is not the same as suggesting that Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas must be elected President of Mexico, of course. In some respects it could involve much less than that, and in other respects much more. Whoever the president might be, his (or her) conduct would be shaped by a radically new set of incentives and constraints. For example, under multiparty electoral democracy the hypothesis would have to be entertained that after the first three years of the six-year presidential term a renewal of Congress could give rise to an opposition majority in the legislature. The manner in which the Executive would have to coordinate with party supporters (and opponents) in Congress would accordingly be transformed. Similarly, state governors would be chosen solely according to the preferences of their respective electorates, rather than vetted for approval by the *gran elector* in the presidential palace. Again, state-federal political relationships would be transformed. Under a competitive democratic system, elected politicians would become much more answerable to their respective constituents, and would have far less incentive to show deference to centrally constituted authority. Far more coordination would arise through negotiations between autonomous actors, and there would be far less impositionism from above. Public opinion would be less readily corralled into endorsing whatever the current batch of *científicos* or state intellectuals judged to be in its best interest. These are the commonplaces of democratic politics that would have to acquire a Mexican content on the way to a full and conventional 'democratic transition.' They would arise whether or not the currently ruling party succeeded in getting its candidates chosen by the electorate. Under a full transition to democracy the opposition parties and the PRI would all acknowledge the right of the others to govern, according to the choice of the electorate.

The scenario sketched above is certainly banal, but anyone familiar with the texture of Mexican political life will also recognize that it sounds extremely farfetched. It could hardly come about through stealth, since it would require a drastic revision of deeply entrenched practices and operating assumptions, not only on the part of the ruling political forces, but also on the part of opposition strategists and in the perceptions and expectations of the public at large.

The essence of any such 'democratic rupture' is that the currently still-dominant principle of revolutionary (or at least inherited) legitimacy would be replaced by the quite distinct principle of popular electoral sovereignty. In order to confirm the switch to this alternative principle of government (and to overcome cynicism about the electoral process, which is rooted in over seventy years of systematic manipulation) the electoral will would have to prevail in the course of some visible conflict over its authority. This requirement for visible rupture contrasts with the regime's hope of achieving a democracy by stealth under which the illusion is maintained that the alternative principles of representation need never clash. To maintain this illusion the regime seeks to deny all possibility of *future* incompatibility between the two principles, while evading or denying the fact that they were ever at variance in the past. Thus it requires both historical oblivion and a suspension of disbelief about the future. Unless these can be sustained, democratization inescapably involves a 'rupture' of consciousness.

It is hard to imagine how a visible display of the sanctity of the electorate's will can be mounted in Mexico without courting a considerable degree of at least short-term political instability. Mexicans of many different backgrounds have all been strongly socialized into authoritarian convictions about the nature of the electoral process in their country. If confronted by visible demonstration that, henceforth, popular sovereignty and 'institutional uncertainty' about election outcomes were to prevail, even the most farsighted and democratically inclined of political actors would take some time to absorb the full implications. A series of experiments and episodes of political theatre⁸ would, I think, be needed to create the new mental pictures required for actors to operate in a democratic manner. This might also require rather complex and extensive processes of historical revisionism, as suppressed questions came up for reconsideration (e.g. about the 1940 election, the 1952 election, etc., etc.). It is hard to judge how much of the consensual past would have to be unraveled and reknitted to accommodate the supremacy of popular sovereignty as a governing principle.

In addition to this somewhat subjective ('psychological' or 'political culture') impediment to accepting a democratic rupture in Mexico, there are other more tangible obstacles. The system of presidential dominance means that there really is only one (indivisible) electoral prize up for democratic contention, with almost nothing in the way of real compensation prizes for the losers. Perhaps the starkness of this reality could eventually be softened by some system of increased

⁸ As with the study of political violence, mentioned above, there is scope for more analytical work on the catalyzing effect of acts of 'political theatre' in precipitating regime breakdown or shaping the uncertainties of a transition. The 'Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo' provide one nonviolent illustration which has been widely noted. The findings of the Truth and Justice Commissions in Chile and Uruguay have recently been the subject of a careful comparative dissertation by Dr. Alexandra de Brito. Subcomandante Marcos has recently displayed how political theatre can be used to disrupt the complacency of official discourse in post-NAFTA Mexico.

power sharing between the federal executive and a revitalized Congress, but that remains at best a distant and elusive prospect. In the meantime, democrats will have to contend with the Mexican presidency as it is currently known to operate—with its huge and embedded subculture of patronage, placemanship, impositionism, and impunity. A democratic rupture would necessarily subject this inherited structure to far-reaching criticism and calls for restructuring. The political interests at stake would be unlikely to accept such a frontal assault on their privileges without resistance, so here too a degree of political theatre would be required to convince doubters that past undemocratic practices really were open to correction. Even in the event of a democratic rupture, and with the skillful use of political theatre, the customs and practices built up by the PRI regime over three-quarters of a century would not be easily reformed. (Think of Hosakawa's brief tenure in post-LDP Japan.)

Moreover, it is not just the privileges of the state bureaucracy or the political class narrowly conceived that would have to be considered here. The regime has lasted so long, and functioned so effectively, that a whole battery of '*fuerzas vivas*' have grown up in the economy and in the society, enjoying the privileges nurtured under the shelter of authoritarian rule. The private television monopoly, organized labor, the newly minted generation of Mexican billionaires, all these and many others will view the possibility of a shift to popular sovereignty as involving a degree of risk and uncertainty that could put their vital interests in jeopardy. Thus strong resistance to a democratic rupture can be anticipated not just as a product of psychological inertia or the legacy of an authoritarian political culture, but also as a rational strategy of self-protection by dominant interests.

I do not conclude that the hypothesis of a clear democratic rupture in Mexico can be discarded for the foreseeable future—only that if it occurs, it will involve a strongly destabilizing interregnum. Reviewing the prospects as I have outlined them, the conclusion might well be that prudent democrats would draw back from the very evident risks involved, and would settle instead for whatever incremental reform might be attainable through stealth. This is the logic of the PAN and of the softliners within the regime who always draw back from outright defection when breakdown seems to loom.

However, my opinion is that underlying processes of regime delegitimization make it progressively harder to keep the existing show on the road without assuming the risks of a shift over to the principle of popular sovereignty. The various expedients that have recently been tried in order to fend off the necessity for full transition to democracy (NAFTA, ever more frantic cycles of political reform legislation, improvised devices to split and buy off disaffected elements) all seem to be declining assets. The hope that 'just once more' the system can buy itself another six years of continuity disguised as liberalization could well prove a triumph of authoritarian self-deception in the face of an awakening of civil society that can no longer be postponed. The idea

that 'liberalization' need never escape the control of its authors strikes me as contrary to all we have learned from country after country outside Mexico. Consequently, despite all the risks it could involve, my conclusion is that the realistic observer of Mexico should pay due attention to the possibility of an imminent democratic rupture.

When he read the first draft of this paper, Abraham F. Lowenthal remonstrated with me at this point, for "dropping my bombshell and then fleeing." He pressed me to specify how much of a possibility, how, why, and what form it might take. I repeatedly delayed the drafting of this paper, in the hope that I might find clear answers to these questions. Between December 1993 and mid-March 1994 it seemed quite plausible to anticipate a breakaway Camacho candidacy, which would have turned the August presidential election into a four-horse race. (It should be kept in mind that despite the huge powers of the presidency, Mexico's electoral managers never thought it necessary to establish a *segunda vuelta* (run-off), since the PRI's candidate was always expected to come out way ahead.) Following the assassination of Colosio that potential source of unpredictability has apparently been eliminated, but many other uncertainties still hang over the August elections. If conducted in a climate of peace and with an honest count, then everything remains subject to the vagaries of a long and difficult election campaign (not an experience Mexican voters have ever known in the past). But what probability should we attach to the hypotheses of peace and transparency, when even the identity and strategic objectives of Colosio's assassins remains unknown? (It troubles me that he was eliminated two days after the constitutional bar on the candidacy of sitting cabinet ministers came into effect; this could signify sophisticated political timing.) In the face of these imponderables all I can offer is generalities. Democratic rupture could be precipitated by the August 1994 elections, for example, through any one of the following routes:

- i) a major renewed split in the PRI;
- ii) an upsurge in support for either of the opposition candidates sufficient to induce those in authority to respect the verdict of the polls;
- iii) too visible and clumsy an effort by the authorities to backtrack on the promised political reforms;
- iv) a surge of grassroots social disorder and unrest that frightened the various contending political elites into a democratizing pact.

None of these possibilities can be discounted. If a democratic rupture of some kind were to materialize, we should expect to see rather large transfers of initiative and responsibility from the centre down to much more local levels. The highly disciplined and nationally structured political actors with whom we have become so familiar could well fragment. Most fragile democracies in Latin America manifest severe 'problems of order' at the societal level, and we

should expect similar tendencies in any full Mexican transition, especially since the country's justice system suffers serious deficiencies. There could also be some at least transient difficulties concerning the assertion of civilian authority over the police and the military, and sharp regional inequalities within the federation could easily become another focus of concern. Given the strong integration of the Mexican economy and society into an increasingly unified North America we should also anticipate relatively strong feedback from the international side, perhaps intensifying uncertainties during the height of the hypothetical interregnum.

Some of this may seem overly dramatic, and those who are sufficiently alarmed will turn their backs on any thought of such a democratic transition. However, my view is that the tendencies just sketched are in any case present in Mexican society, and in due course they will probably manifest themselves one way or the other. It is not clear to me that the worst way to experience them is to allow them to develop in the course of a democratic transition. The authoritarian reflex rests on the conviction that the Mexican electorate is too immature to assume responsibility for judging how best to resolve such problems, and that Mexico's civil society is too dependent or unformed to stabilize and contain conflicting social demands. The fear is that civil society (if allowed freely to express itself) might still prove to be distinctly uncivil. But to my mind that overestimates the farsightedness and disinterestedness of Mexico's authoritarian elites and misjudges the sophistication and capacity for judgment of the Mexican people.