

Democracy in North America: Two Views of Mexico

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Matthew C. Gutman, *The Romance of Democracy: Compliant Defiance in Contemporary Mexico* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002).

Julia Preston and Samuel Dillon, *Opening Mexico: The Making of a Democracy* (New York: Farrar Straus & Giroux, 2004).

The defeat of the *Partido Institucional Revolucionario* (PRI) in the Mexican presidential elections of 2000 is commonly viewed as Mexico's democratic breakthrough. The PRI (and its predecessors) held power in Mexico longer than any other self-described socialist or communist government in the twentieth century and its defeat in 2000 was an event of enormous national significance. But the depth and health of Mexican democracy is a source of continuing debate leading up to the presidential contest in July of this year, the first since that historic victory. The election of Vicente Fox and his center-right *Partido Acción Nacional* (PAN) party was a victory for electoral choice in Mexico, but in retrospect, it did not deliver the significant structural changes, reforms, and economic benefits that had long been hoped for by so many. The economic circumstances of the average Mexican have not substantially changed since 2000. Economic development and growth in the north under NAFTA has been matched with a continuing decline in Mexico's rural and agricultural base, resulting in increasing economic inequality, particularly for Mexico's large rural farming class and indigenous populations (See for example: *NAFTA's Promise & Reality: Lessons from Mexico for the Hemisphere*, Demetrios Papademetriou, *et al.*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, November 2003; "Baja Pobreza Rural Pero Crece Desigualdad: BM," *La Jornada*, 25 August, 2005). Corruption remains endemic, independent journalism and trade unionism are still risky, often dangerous occupations, and military, law enforcement, political and judicial institutions continue to operate under the influence of organized crime and old-style graft. There is no shortage of wealth in Mexico, always a strong contender among Forbes' list of nations with the most billionaires; nevertheless, a stark and historically entrenched state of economic inequality remains firmly in place, despite signs of increased civil and political freedom. The two books examined here serve as useful primers from two very different perspectives for those interested in following this year's presidential campaign, a campaign which has already found a place in Mexican political his-

tory for its drama, intrigue and unexpected developments. *The Romance of Democracy: Compliant Defiance in Contemporary Mexico* by Matthew C. Gutman is an “ethnography” aimed at the subject of Mexican democracy on a local level. Gutman is a professor of Social Sciences and International Affairs at Brown University. His intent is to write an “ethnographic study of popular politics and official subjugation” in a *colonia popular* (or working-class suburb) in the northwestern area of Mexico City called Santo Domingo (Gutman, 1). He examines the politics of everyday life on a local or microcosmic level, identifying attitudes and behaviours in his neighbourhood and placing them in the context of broader historical and social changes over a period up to and immediately following the election of Vicente Fox.

Julia Preston and Samuel Dillon, the authors of *Opening Mexico: The Making of Democracy*, draw on material from two decades as reporters on Latin America for the *New York Times* and nearly ten years as residents of Mexico City. Theirs is an account of the recent emergence of democratic institutions in Mexico, primarily on the state and federal levels. Their approach and subject matter is journalistic: they use local stories and anecdotes to illustrate larger historical events as they unfold. They have impressive access to Mexico’s political and institutional elites and are able to provide intimate descriptions of the colourful and often nefarious characters running the country. In their view, Mexico has, over the last 30 years, undergone nothing short of a democratic revolution (Preston and Dillon, *xii*).

The *colonia* or *barrio* that forms the locus of *The Romance of Democracy* was originally populated by squatters in the early 1970s as part of that city’s notorious and continuing population explosion (Gutman, 2). Over time, it has become a settled, lower middle-class neighborhood of narrow tree-lined streets, modest one and two-story houses, apartment blocks and small family stores. The area has a friendly, bustling feel but it occupies a precarious position on the border between Mexico’s haves and have-nots. Gutman has lived in Santo Domingo for stints of some length since the early 1990s, long enough that he has witnessed the Zapatista rebellion, the peso collapse of 1995, NAFTA and the demise of the PRI presidential succession through the eyes of this neighbourhood’s citizens. One of his main aims is to document those reactions through the words and actions of his neighbours.

Gutman’s acknowledged precursor is the American ethnographer Oscar Lewis, whose studies of peasant, working-class and underclass communities in Mexico during the 1950s and 1960s achieved much popularity and notoriety. Gutman picks up on Lewis’s project and methodology and seeks to address a specific question that arose from Lewis’s work, namely, whether his subjects are active agents in opposing their marginalization and subjugation (Gutman, 50). In addressing this question, Gutman comes up with the idea of “compliant defiance,” his characterization of how the “agency” relationship between the state

and the people of Santo Domingo manifests itself on a personal and political level (Gutman, 6).

The theoretical framework used by Gutman to approach his subject matter, including the idea of “compliant defiance” itself, distracts from an otherwise interesting and frequently entertaining account. For example, Gutman examines various strands of thought around the contested idea of democracy but never arrives at a working definition or postulation (Gutman, xxviii). In turn, he overlooks any extended examination of attitudes towards a number of institutional elements in Mexican civic life: local and state government, the judiciary, the media, labour unions, and so on. Instead, he favours an emphasis on what might be called Mexican gender politics—changes in traditional values, the division of labour in the home, *machismo*—matters of interest and importance but not ones the author always ties convincingly to his theme of “democracy” (Gutman, 32-38).

Gutman is nevertheless a sensitive observer of life in the *colonia*. The most satisfying parts of Gutman’s book are passages where he lets his subjects tell their stories, the unabridged “Oscar Lewis” moments. One character appearing throughout the book is a hard-drinking garage mechanic named Gabi. Gabi embodies “compliant defiance.” His particular take on politics is a purposeful non-participation in the electoral process: he is informed, interested, and opinionated, but does not vote. Like many Mexicans, and certainly the vast majority examined in this book, Gabi views all politicians and political parties as corrupt. Discussions around Gabi’s political abstinence form the backdrop to some revealing roadside discussions where we meet advocates of the competing political parties (Gutman, 168).

Gutman’s book also presents some useful historical background to the current political and economic climate in Mexico and the attitudes of his subjects. Typically, he will recount a conversation with one of his neighbours about, say, the *zapatista* movement, and then provide some theoretical and historical context to illuminate the attitudes and opinions presented (Gutman, 144-157). In reading the book, one develops a sense of the variety of attitudes in the *colonia*, although it is a reflection of the pace of change in Mexican politics that at the time of this review, some of the political references are dated. The book predates, for example, the entrance onto the national political stage of Andrés Manuel López Obrador, a charismatic, leftist-populist former Mexico City mayor who currently holds a significant lead in the polls leading up to this year’s elections. Regarding other recent developments, Gabi would probably find comfort in the *zapatistas*’ unusual decision to run a national political campaign without actually proffering candidates or seeking office. One wonders if Gutman would view this latest maneuver by *subcommandante* Marcos as the ultimate act of “compliant defiance.”

Preston and Dillon begin their account in *Opening Democracy* with a short

overview of Mexican history and politics up to the 1960s and in particular, the rise and influence of the PRI in every aspect of Mexican civic life. They argue that political culture under the PRI was unique in Latin America. While Mexican presidents of the post-revolutionary period have essentially been despots or quasi-monarchs, the ability of Mexico's rulers to maintain a peaceful succession of power and co-opt both the military and organized labour has set Mexico apart from the pattern of brutal and unstable military regimes which have dominated most of Latin America over the same period (Preston and Dillon, 407).

If Mexico's successive PRI presidents do not easily bear comparison with the Somozas and the Pinochets, the PRI nevertheless operated for the most part like a large and well-diversified organized-crime syndicate. Terror and intimidation, if not ever-present, were certainly put to use at critical moments. The repressive face of the PRI was revealed to the world on 2 October, 1968 when a group of protesters, many of them students from Mexico's largest university, gathered in the Tlatelolco district of Mexico City to engage in a peaceful demonstration. Demonstrators that day were herded into a square and fired upon by government troops. When the shooting subsided, an estimated 200 to 400 demonstrators had been killed. The Tlatelolco massacre left little lasting impression on the world media, but the effect of this event on domestic popular opinion was profound. According to Preston and Dillon, Tlatelolco was the formative and defining moment for a new generation of journalists, activists, writers, and intellectuals who would lead popular reform movements over subsequent decades (Preston and Dillon, 84).

Two subsequent disasters provided further impetus to Mexico's democratic revolution, one man-made and one natural. The economic fortunes of the Mexican economy have long been tied to the volatile price of oil and in the early 1980s, during the term of President José Lopez Portillo, a crash in the price of crude sent shock waves through the Mexican economy, already saddled with an unsustainable debt. In an effort to shore up a peso in free-fall, the Portillo government forced citizens to convert their savings in popular dollar accounts to pesos, and in the process, a generation of middle-class Mexicans saw their nest-eggs obliterated (Preston and Dillon, 96). Just as Mexicans were picking themselves up from the Portillo financial crisis a devastating earthquake hit Mexico City, which killed and rendered homeless tens of thousands of people. The PRI's incompetence and neglect in dealing with this disaster brought average Mexicans into open defiance of the authorities. The earthquake gave rise to a new period of truth-telling in the media, a media long compromised or controlled by the PRI (Preston and Dillon, 113).

Popular opposition to the PRI had reached the point of possible victory for the left-wing PRD party in the presidential race of 1988, but PRI candidate Carlos Salinas effectively stole the election through one of the more brazen

examples of electoral manipulation in modern memory (Preston and Dillon, 159-169). The electoral theft which brought Salinas to office nevertheless marked a new era of popular dissent. Opposition politicians, the press and ordinary citizens spoke freely about the outrages of the election and demonstrated in massive numbers. One of the more striking photographs in the book is that of newly elected PAN representative Vicente Fox, standing in the Chamber of Deputies with ballots stuck to each side of his head in a crude imitation of Salinas' large ears, openly parodying the president "elect" (Preston and Dillon, 178). *Perestroika* had arrived.

The "Carlos Salinas Show," as the authors call it, was suddenly interrupted on New Year's Day, 1994, when the Zapatista Liberation Army (EZLN) took control of several towns in Chiapas. The *zapatistas* denounced NAFTA and called for a nation-wide armed uprising against the government. Preston and Dillon suggest that while the rebellion was a dramatic and attention-grabbing event, the movement was never a sustainable or particularly well-organized military threat. The authors are probably correct in their suggestion that as a political force, the *zapatistas* are a marginal feature on the national political stage (Preston and Dillon, 455, 460). Certainly, the urgent promises of change that followed in the wake of the rebellion are now scarcely remembered in the capital.

If the Mexico City earthquake was the beginning of a seismic shift in Mexican civil society, and the *zapatistas* a significant but isolated aftershock, Preston and Dillon suggest that the 1994 peso crisis was the event which destroyed the PRI regime (Preston and Dillon, 248). This most recent of Mexico's currency meltdowns and the new and ignominious role of Wall Street debt-speculators in triggering it is a subject worthy of detailed examination and receives fairly superficial treatment here. The political fallout from the crisis ensured that Salinas' successor Ernesto Zedillo would be the last in an unbroken line of PRI presidents.

The two books examined here present different views of Mexican democracy and in many respects lead the reader to draw divergent conclusions. Preston and Dillon's version of Mexican democratic development is a fascinating and compelling read which suggests that fundamental and lasting democratic reform has taken hold. They also provide some insightful background on some of the key players in this year's election, including the shadowy past of PRI candidate Roberto Madrazo (Preston and Dillon, 265). Gutman avoids drawing any firm conclusions or making any clear prognostications, however, one's sense is that he, like his subjects, is skeptical about the prospect of significant change in Mexican politics. Gutman's account would suggest that the idea of electoral reform bringing about change is a romantic notion of minimal practical benefit, and that the real territory of political struggle is in the home and neighborhood; hopefully, subtle changes over time at the grassroots level will

slowly filter up to the oligarchs running the country.

If economic development is seen as a key payoff of democratic reform, then most Mexicans have good reason for continued skepticism. But the election of Fox was not the final chapter in the history of Mexico's emergence as a functioning democracy. State elections such as those recently held in Oaxaca continue to raise serious concerns about corruption and political repression. Recent attempts by the PRI and PAN to have Lopez Obrador excluded from the upcoming federal elections had all the hallmarks of a Salinas-style plot. Mexicans are now marching in the streets in huge numbers and with regularity, protesting a presidency that has achieved little more than its own survival and attacking continuing abuses by the old guard at the state and local levels. Vigorous public debate and popular involvement in the political process is compelling evidence that ordinary Mexicans are seizing the opportunity to shape the destiny of their country as never before. It would be foolish to make any strong predictions about the future of Mexican democracy but one can say with some confidence that this year's election promises to be unlike any other in Mexican history.