Mexican History Term Paper

**The Drug War:**

**Failed Democratization and Market-Oriented Economics Cause Mexican Insecurity**

Once a model for Latin American development, Mexico is now home to an epidemic of drug related violence. The state is apparently powerless to stop organized crime, despite increasing military presence in criminal hotspots along the U.S-Mexican border. Since January 2007, more than 28,000 Mexicans died in drug violence.[[1]](#footnote-1) This is a cruel twist for a nation which, during the oil-driven Mexican Miracle of the 1970s, was poised to join the first world of stable industrialized states. Under the heavy-handed guidance of the Partido Revolutionario Institutional, Mexico seemed destined to remain a prosperous authoritarian regime with a thin veneer of democratic legitimacy. However, untested economic policies swept through the country as they did through the much of the world in the 1980s with the help of the "Washington consensus." With the removal of social security nets during an extended period of economic upheaval, Mexico's ruling party was replaced in a wave of popular discontent.

The new leadership, with the institutions of an authoritarian regime, did little to relieve the nation of widespread poverty. As a result, the impoverished were unable to either escape crushing deprivation legally or mobilize to replace the government without fear of reprisal. Insurgency, in the familiar form of guerrilla movements and the novel form of increasingly powerful drug gangs, was a natural response to government failure without legitimate avenues of resistance. Mexico now hangs in the balance, unable to reform due to persistent insecurity, and unable to reestablish the balance of economic prosperity which had allowed the authoritarian system to exist.

**Section I: Failed democratization**

Following the Mexican Revolution of 1910, the PRI had an effective political monopoly based on allocation of prosperity and authoritarian stability. Poor economic performance in the 1980s and 90s undermined this. An opening was created in the responses to economic crisis for democratization. Since the 1960s and 70s, urbanization of the poor and the rise of student movements have fallen outside the PRI’s traditional campesino base.[[2]](#footnote-2) Similarly, the expropriation of banks in response to the debt crisis of 1982 chilled the warm relationship between the PRI and their clients in the Mexican business class. Students, urban workers, and dissidents within the PRI broke off to form the Partido Revolutionario Democratico, a center left coalition. The business class broke off to join the PAN, a center right coalition.[[3]](#footnote-3)

In the 1950s and 60s, the PRI used electoral reform to encourage nominal competition and maintain legitimate rule. The goal was to balance the PRI’s hold on power with the façade of legitimacy. As a result, opposition parties were co-opted with special benefits such as lucrative government posts and the possibility of illicit additional income through corruption. The Authentic Party of the Mexican Revolution and the Socialist Popular Party were totally co-opted, becoming figure pieces to demonstrate the legitimacy of the PRI regime. These ‘opposition’ parties ran no presidential candidate between 1958 and 1976. The PAN was a notable exception, proving resistant to bribery and posing a credible, albeit small, threat to PRI leadership. The abstention of the PAN from the 1976 election left President Portrillo in a difficult position of appearing legitimately elected while running unopposed.[[4]](#footnote-4)

After the splintering election of 1988, electoral reform was far from guaranteed. Presidents de la Madrid and Salinas succeeded in implementing retrogressive electoral reform to ensure the PRI a stranglehold on the legislature in the event of electoral defeat. Only the challenge of armed uprising in the southern state of Chiapas in 1994 forced Salinas to create an institutional foundation for fair democratic elections. Additional pressure from *La Crisis,* the wave of inflation-fueled financial ruin that swept the country in the 1990s, pushed President Zedillo to adopt further reaching electoral reforms. It was in the 2000 federal election that the PAN was able to end the PRI’s 71 year hold on power in the Mexican Chamber of Deputies and presidency.[[5]](#footnote-5) Over the course of 12 years, the PRI went from controlling 98.4% of the Mexican government at the municipal level to controlling 44.4%.[[6]](#footnote-6) However, despite the change in parties, the authoritarian mechanisms of rule still exist, such as hyperpresidentialism and little encouragement or legitimation of grassroots feedback. Given high enough levels of dissatisfaction with the ruling regime, the absence of credible alternate avenues of engagement could lead to insurgency, especially with widespread poverty.

**Section II: Neoliberal reform**

A: Neoliberal roots

The PRI won the presidency in 1982 before a moratorium on the crippling public debt and subsequent devaluation of the peso. As a result of this devaluation, inflation skyrocketed, launching the exchange rate of pesos to dollars from 26:1 to 342:1 between 1981 and 1985. The devaluation of the peso was designed to attract foreign investment, but the foreign business community still lacked confidence in the PRI regime after the earlier expropriation of banks.[[7]](#footnote-7) Additionally, a catastrophic earthquake struck Mexico City in 1985, reducing investor confidence as the PRI presented an extremely unpopular response. In 1986, the General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs was written as a gamble to allay foreign investors' fears with favorable conditions to high capital investment, especially the reduction of tariffs. Traditional Keynesian economic wisdom holds that during times of economic recession, protectionism (including high tariffs) can isolate domestic industry from international competition, in effect preserving it.

Most countries tighten control of imports as the economy stutters, such as Brazil and Argentina, both of which were under the control of typically neoliberal military regimes during the Mexican debt crisis of the 1980s. Mexico opened up to foreign investment in the hopes of replacing industries destroyed by cheap imports with new industries to create cheap exports. The Brazilian military junta adopted a gradualist approach to reducing tariffs, and only *ten years* after the balance of payments crisis abated.[[8]](#footnote-8) Argentina under Augusto Pinochet, who was no stranger to neoliberal economics, instituted protectionist policies as a result of the debt crisis. The Mexican gamble failed; the devaluation doubled the proportion of the GDP which was invested in exports between 1982-83, but all other moves to increase foreign investment flopped. By the end of President de la Madrid’s term in 1988, GDP proportions had not grown from their 1983 levels.

As a result, real wages fell precipitously. In 1983, popular unrest with the regime forced the PRI to recognize opposition parties, when the PRI chose the conservative PAN as a preferable opponent. Also, the FDN, later the PRD, broke away from the PRI to form a center left coalition. PRI President Salinas renegotiated the national debt, ensuring lower payments and non-default with US assistance for collateral. An agreement was reached in 1990 to convert Mexican debt into Brady Bonds, easing the strain on government caused by the unmanageable public debt. Salinas followed with partial elimination of restrictions to foreign direct investments, followed by full elimination in 1991. The sale of nationalized industries to pay off foreign debt succeeded, resulting in a budget surplus in 1992, while simultaneously causing corruption scandals due to the low prices paid for government monopolies. These reforms, including the privatization of government controlled industries, again fail to stimulate foreign investment due to investor fears of instability.[[9]](#footnote-9) In short, the Mexican government removed protections for Mexican workers in the hopes that foreign investors would be attracted, but was ultimately left with neither large amounts of investment nor a protected lower class. The attempts of PRI regimes in the 1980s and early 90s recall attempts of the dictator Porfirio Diaz to appeal to foreigners at the expense of Mexicans, which triggered deep mistrust in the nationalistic Mexican population.

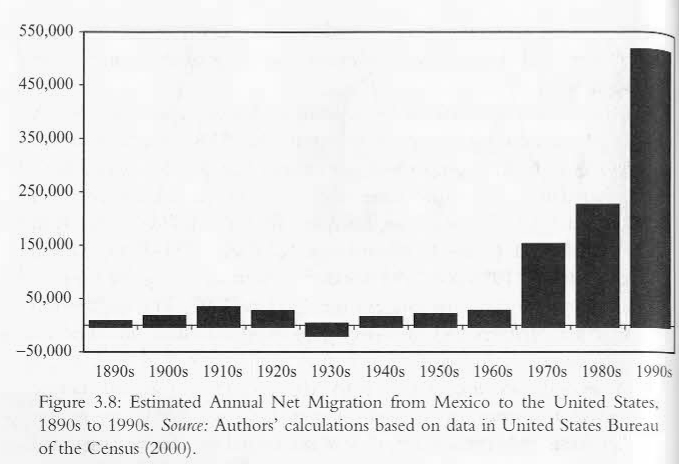
B: Creation of NAFTA

In a further effort to allay investor fears of Mexican instability, President Salinas suggested a free trade treaty that would be difficult for any party to back out of. The North American Free Trade Agreement was born. NAFTA was not principally about tariffs, as tariffs were already low for most goods other than agricultural products and heavy industrial commodities like steel. Instead, for Mexico, it was a matter of investor confidence. NAFTA required equal standing of domestic and foreign companies, banning previous provisions of Mexican law that prevented US and Canadian companies from expatriating profits while also forbidding one treaty partner from expropriating the property of another. This last inclusion was a direct reference to Mexico's past banking crisis and key to ensuring investor confidence.

NAFTA also created provisions for enforcement, such as the NAFTA tribunals. Individual investors or companies could bring complaints that the treaty had been breached to the independent NAFTA tribunal for adjudication. NAFTA tribunal cases could sanction local or state governments with fines, to be paid by the federal government of the offending country. Domestic courts, however, could neither review nor overturn the decisions of the NAFTA tribunal. This is obviously problematic for the sovereignty of offending parties, although all treaty partners would ideally be represented on the tribunal. All infractions could be punished by trade sanctions and fines.[[10]](#footnote-10)

C: Effects of NAFTA

Figure 3.6, FDI in Mexico. 

The foreign financial stake in Mexico spiked in the first quarter after the United States congress ratified NAFTA. Similarly, investment spiked in 1994 when NAFTA came into effect, despite notably large and violent rebel action in the southern provinces. The foreign direct investment, however, was unstable. It oscillated between 5 and 25% of total capital formation in Mexico, which relatively low.[[11]](#footnote-11) The rate of investment after the passage of NAFTA, with fierce domestic political opposition and globalization-fueled reduction of national sovereignty, does not increase in a greater proportion than after the passage of the less intrusive General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs. The GATT was equally effective, and did not require unpopular changes to the Mexican constitution, nor did it precipitate a guerrilla insurgency. Similarly, Mexico had a much more robust economy in the heyday of protectionism, between 1950-80. The real GDP per capita grew at twice the rate of post-NAFTA numbers before protection was phased out.[[12]](#footnote-12) As a measure of the human effects of NAFTA implementation, especially its effects on agriculture, migration to the United States exploded- see figure 3.8. 

Also, the United States grew at a rate 77% faster than that of Mexico between 1994 and 2005, a rate NAFTA intended to equalize but obviously failed to effect.

NAFTA provisions an increase in foreign manufacturing investment. At the same time, manufacturing wages drop to 50% of their 1981 level when adjusted for inflation in 1994. A large segment of society was being prepared for extremely low paying work in the sub-optimal and frequently horrendous conditions of *maquiladoras*.[[13]](#footnote-13) In 2005, Mexican manufacturing wages averaged 15% of American wages, resulting in the flight of labor intensive industries to the Mexican border from the United States. These depreciations are combined with the large scale environmental degradation which coincided with the introduction of *maquiladoras.*

D: Workers specifically

Manufacturing has accounted for 85% of Mexico’s exports since the late 1990s. However, manufacturing is only 20% of the Mexican economy. More than half of Mexico’s manufacturing is in *maquiladoras*, which assemble components made elsewhere into finished goods for exports. These factories, in addition to substandard labor conditions and grievous environmental degradation, add little value to the economy. *Maquiladoras* add only 2.6% to the Mexican GDP, standing somewhere between insignificant and small.[[14]](#footnote-14) Certainly, they do not replace the cigarettes, textiles, footwear, electrical machinery, and most importantly *agricultural* industries which went into decline as a result of NAFTA.[[15]](#footnote-15)

E: Agriculture specifically

Agriculture employs 20% of Mexicans. NAFTA liberalization has helped northwestern Mexican produce farmers deliver crops to southwestern American markets in California and Arizona, where transportation costs are low and the price of produce is comparatively high.[[16]](#footnote-16) As a result of the Revolution of 1910, in response to Emiliano Zapata's constant guerilla pressure, the Mexican Constitution previously provided an indigenous framework for communal farms called *ejidos.* These were lands to be held in common, as was the pre-Columbian Mexican tradition. This system was seen especially by the poor and indigenous as a key victory of the revolution, allowing land reform and a reduction in dynastic *haciendas*. In 1992, Salinas reformed the *ejido* system to encourage private investment- reforms allowed rental, sale, and sharecropping of communal lands voluntarily. At the same time, measures were taken to register *ejido* lands for the farmers to gain public benefits. The policy satisfied no one. Private banks were unwilling to invest in agriculture due to restrictions on foreclosure built-in to the reforms to protect indigenous farmers from bad harvests. Indigenous farmers were unwilling to register to government schemes due to the newly introduced property taxes on the already impoverished group.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Corn farmers suffer significantly under NAFTA. These maize-dependent agricultural workers comprise 10% of the workforce nationwide. Of these, small farmers comprise the vast bulk. The majority of Mexican farmers have 12 acres of land or less, 9% have access to irrigation, and only 35% use tractors. Furthermore, despite low rural wages, Mexican farmers pay a one-third greater input cost to grow corn than their United States counterparts. Part of the difficulty for Mexican corn farmers is that transportation costs are punitively high- it costs 3 times as much to ship corn from northern Sinaloa to Mexico City than from New Orleans to Vera Cruz to Mexico City. Over time, addenda to NAFTA increased the quota of corn coming from the United States into Mexico, and in 2009 these limitations were lifted completely.[[18]](#footnote-18) Leading up to this full deregulation, corn imports tripled for Mexico from US between 1994 and 2003.[[19]](#footnote-19)

The resulting economic weight placed on the poorest Mexicans lead to an exodus. Between 1942 and 1964, Mexican laborers were allowed legal entry to the United States under the Bracero Program. Mexican migration to the US has gone on at least since 1890. The border, however, was typically permeable, and the net migration between 1890 to 1960 from Mexico to the US was 25,000. The increased focus on funding border security on the United States' side in the 1970s and beyond has ensured that once in the United States, illegal immigrants will not cross back into Mexico willingly. Trade liberalization has only served to accelerate the pace of emigration. The rate is difficult to pin down exactly due to criminal punishment for immigrants, but it is estimated by census data at 500,000 people per year entering the US from Mexico during the 1990s. As a result, the Mexican born population in the US has skyrocketed, from 4.3 million in 1990 to 9 million in 2000.[[20]](#footnote-20)

Mexico’s stability rests on the legitimacy of the party in power, in charge of authoritarian mechanisms of rule. If the party cannot sustain the economy and *deliver the goods*, then the authoritarian system loses its cause d’être. The resulting disconnect between the governmental structure and their ability to maintain prosperity clears the way for instability.

**Section III: Physical insecurity**

The liberalization of trade and especially the implementation of NAFTA allowed the stuttering process of political liberalization to oust Mexico's ruling party. However, due to continued and systemic rural poverty, Mexico under the PAN faced a litany of problems in keeping the most disenfranchised under control. "Ultimately, insurgency responds to, and finds justification in, the gross socioeconomic inequalities of the country." Insurgency is in most cases considered a tool of last resort in democratic systems. In Mexico's case, insurgency occurs alongside political and trade liberalization.[[21]](#footnote-21) The democracy dividend, which predicts peace in cases of political opening, did not materialize in Mexico, most likely due to the concurrent (and disastrous) restructuring of the economy. "Violent opportunities" arrive in regions where democracy is weakly established and where there are financial outlets for illegal organizations to exploit.[[22]](#footnote-22) In Mexico's chronically impoverished southern states, these opportunities materialize in quantity.

A: Social Rebellion

On New Year's Day, 1994, an army of largely indigenous rebels captured cities and towns in the hinterlands of remote Chiapas, including Altamirano, Chanal, Huistan, Las Margaritas, Oxchuc, Ocosingo and most importantly San Cristóbal de Las Casas. The army called itself the Ejercito Liberacion Nacional Zapatista, the Zapatista Army of National Liberation, drawing on the image of land reformer and national hero Emiliano Zapata. Striking on the day that NAFTA was due to be implemented, the rebels issued a clear agenda to the media, "exhorting the rest of the Mexican population to unite and help them in their struggle to end the 'illegitimate dictatorship'" of President Salinas and the PRI.[[23]](#footnote-23) While the rebellion called on national popular support, it planned its uprising to function without it. The size of the insurgency is difficult to calculate. The Pentagon estimated as many as 7,500 armed rebels and at least 45,000 active sympathizers in a report leaked in 2000. The Mexican military, with good reason to underestimate, places the number of combatants at little over 2000 and fewer than 15,000 sympathizers.[[24]](#footnote-24)

Many rebel groups exist in Mexico, including the EZLN, the ERPI, the FARP, the EVRP, and the CCRP. Sources have alluded to between 10-17 insurgent groups active simultaneously in Mexico in the 1990s and beyond. The variance is caused by the short lifespan of illegal organizations and possible fabrication by security forces to instill fear of instability in the public.[[25]](#footnote-25) Various guerrilla groups operated in 20 of Mexico's 31 states, including the Federal District. The largest and most active groups are concentrated in Chiapas, Guerrero, and Oaxaca in southern and central Mexico. This zone of guerrilla involvement also coincides with the largest rates of poverty in Mexico. Adding to the difficulty of enforcement, the operating zones of both the EZLN and the EPR were isolated yet highly populous rural areas. The government had a hard time distributing soldiers to fight the insurgency and aid to win the insurgents' supporters.[[26]](#footnote-26) Previous distributors of aid, including the National Peasant Confederation, had been controlled by the PRI and lacked the formerly public resources to distribute. Similarly, NAFTA marked a turning away from the rural economy in favor of manufacturing, which reflected heavily on the funding of community organizations that worked in tandem with the government.[[27]](#footnote-27)

Several factors make the EZLN and analogous groups a conundrum to classify; low rates of terrorism (defined as deliberate targeting of noncombatant populations), high rates of popular support, and military components of organizations being overemphasized make the insurgent groups difficult to sort into to clean categories such as illegal, political, or military. For the EZLN, the group seems to evolve between classifications.

The EZLN's armed engagement with the Mexican government only lasted 12 days.[[28]](#footnote-28) It was alternately described as the "first post-communist rebellion in Latin America, a product of the information age, or a symptom of political reality in Mexico's 'new modernity.'”[[29]](#footnote-29) The military strength of the EZLN was not great, just sufficient to prevent the government from recapturing isolated areas of Chiapas. To call it a rebellion, in the sense of past Mexican rebellions which had sought to overthrow the central powers in Mexico City, would be incorrect. While the EZLN started as a violent organization, it built on a substantial basis of radical and unarmed organization which existed concurrently in Chiapas.[[30]](#footnote-30) These organizations, which grew in importance and membership after the decline of the PRI in the 1990s, bore the brunt of governmental and paramilitary violence in the southern regions aimed primarily by local caciques at PRD sympathizers.[[31]](#footnote-31) Given the later transition of the EZLN from guerrilla warfare to opposition politics, this organizing base can be seen as critical for the EZLN's legitimacy in Mexico as well as lending to its credence abroad. As the EZLN existed in an environment inundated in alternative political participation, it should be seen as unsurprising that this was the niche to which the EZLN ultimately gravitated.

The importance of the EZLN is two-fold for this study: they indicate that there is an opening for violent resistance in Mexican society. The ability of oppressive poverty to motivate Mexicans to overcome fear of oppressive government and paramilitary forces created many openings in the 1990s, not least of which will be the rise of narcotrafficking. On the other hand, the Zapatista movement is a durable and uniquely Mexican example of successful democratization. That such a movement would be necessary is indicative of the fissures in Mexican society and government, along longstanding racial and cultural divides. The poorest Mexicans, most frequently indigenous peoples, have little access to official modes of recourse. Alternative political organization, in its extreme represented by taking to the jungles as a guerrilla, is more likely represented today by taking to the caravans of organizations like the EZLN to political rallies like *La Otra Campaña* to create space for the poor in Mexican politics. This is ultimately a long awaited victory for civil society in Mexico.

B: Economic Rebellion

Drug usage is much lower in Mexico than in most industrialized countries. All the same, economic need and institutional weakness have allowed drug trafficking to grow exponentially, along with the corresponding violence of organized crime. The neoliberal policies which were enacted to make Mexico a competitive exporter succeeded, however the growth industries in Mexico are the export of cocaine, heroin, and marijuana to the United States. (138)

Drug interdiction in Mexico had been punitive since its inception in the 1930s, but was cut back during the 1980s as the economy contracted. This opening allowed the drug usage in Mexico to climb 30 percent from 1993 to 1998, according to the Mexican Health Secretariat. While these statistics are still in absolute terms low, the rapid growth indicates an increased supply of drugs in Mexico, corresponding with the early years of liberalization during *La Crisis*. Similarly, the Mexican political system was distracted by the rebellion in Chiapas, and in many cases, already bought out by powerful drug cartels.[[32]](#footnote-32)

A combination of economic and social factors has led to the rising availability of drugs and prominence of drug cartels in Mexico. The economic restructuring of the two previous decades weakened an economy tenuously perched on authoritarian legitimacy.[[33]](#footnote-33) Ultimately, this economic failure lead to institutional overload; wealthy narcotraffickers were able to corrupt the legal system or assassinate those who did not capitulate. With a lowered of standard of living and government salary, it became easier to hire police, politicians, and assassins. Perennial targets included journalists and newspaper editors, as well, to control the flight of information from the war zone (particularly related to corruption).

Beginning in the 1990s and into the 2000s under President Zedillo, drug interdiction efforts began to fold under corruption, leading to the use of Mexican military forces in a police capacity. While the army had been involved in the destruction of crops as early as the 1950s, the use of military as police was a significant change in policy. Its results were mixed. While drug lords were captured (and replaced), pervasive corruption allowed others to escape with help from the Mexican drug czar, a cabinet level military official.[[34]](#footnote-34) Lesser examples of corruption abound. While superficial indicators of success, such as weight of captured drugs and weapons, increased according to the Mexican government, violence spiked dramatically.

**Conclusions**

Mexico is a country of enormous strategic importance to the United States; the expansive border shared between the two nations is ultimately the cause of the Mexican economy's collapse and narcotic reanimation. With the assistance of authoritarian mechanisms of rule unresponsive to popular Mexican opinion, the economy was reorganized to better market exports to the United States. Due to market-based reforms fitting neither with Mexican expectations of their government nor capitalist expectations of a secure country for investment, the economy crashed and remained unstable from the 1980s to today. The prolonged period of dilapidation, in a country once expected to be the leading edge of Latin American development, has allowed the expansion of drug violence amid slow political reorganization.

In addition to strategic analysis and economic statistics describing poverty, we have to consider the Mexican people themselves. On the heels of economic disaster, the largest sector of the economy was brutally disassembled by uninhibited foreign competition and resumed in the form of abusive *maquilladoras*. Worse, the areas hardest hit by drug violence are areas of internal migration, due to their location along the northern border. At the current date, more Mexicans have been killed in drug violence in the last three years than Argentines were assassinated in that country's *Guerra Sucia*.

The Mexican Drug War is a pressing humanitarian crisis. Mexicans cannot be expected to slow their exodus to the United States, regardless of punishment on the American side, until Mexico is stabilized. If the causes are any indication, then the solution to insecurity in Mexico will be found in authentic political reform beyond the changing of monolithic parties, in addition to the reinstatement of protections for the poorest and most marginal of Mexicans.

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