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Foreword

By Jonathan Fox

“The concept of globalization has hit hard. Right in the face. The system no longer hides what’s behind it. It openly says ‘I’ll take your land and exploit you’ ...”

Ignacio del Valle, leader of the Atenco community protests against the proposed new Mexico City airport. ¹

The Mexican-U.S. integration process, with its intense flows of capital, commodities, cultures and communities, is a paradigm case for understanding the globalization process more generally. The Mexican experience shows that trade openings are inextricably linked to broader patterns of social, economic, political and cultural exclusion – both in the popular imagination and at the commanding heights of the ruling political classes. To assess globalization’s winners and losers, we need to take into account the breadth and depth of the Mexican experience with international economic integration.

Why Mexico?

Seen from above, the North American Free Trade Agreement process led the way for the world-wide acceleration of the pace of global economic integration between the North and South that followed. The NAFTA experience is directly informing the on-going negotiations for new trade agreements, both in the hemisphere and specifically with Central America. For example, NAFTA’s little-known but powerful Chapter 11, its “investors’ bill of rights’ that trumps national social and environmental laws, is already embedded in early drafts of the proposed Free Trade Area of the Americas.

Seen from below, Mexico’s Zapatista rebels fired the proverbial ‘shot heard round the world’ that opened the current cycle of protest against top-down globalization. Their widely-echoed charge that NAFTA spelled a “death sentence” for Mexico’s indigenous peoples became a vivid emblem of grassroots struggles against top-down globalization. The rebellion’s inclusionary discourse and multi-media-savvy strategy resonated with a wide range of other campaigns for social justice around the world, energizing the emerging concept of globalization from below. Within Mexico, the rebels showed that history still matters and contributed directly to the national democratization process. They revealed that Mexico’s neoliberal emperor had no clothes. This is the pattern of Mexican resistance that is best-known abroad.

At the same time, *most* Mexicans who challenge the top-down globalization process follow quite different paths. These grassroots movements often sympathize with the Zapatistas’ radical democratic challenge, but follow strategies that emerge from their own political histories, and use tactics that respond to their own specific opportunities and constraints. The chapters that follow show that these initiatives range from discreet worker-by-worker organizing for dignity on the shop floor to combined legal, media and protest campaigns for environmental justice. These cases also help to put cross-border organizing into

¹ Quoted in Maria Rivera, “La lucha no se gana con consignas sino con razones, afirma el dirigente Ignacio del Valle,” La Jornada, 17 July 2002.

context, showing that for most grassroots responses to economic integration, transnational coalition-building is just one dimension of political strategies that remain primarily local and national in focus.²

Some of these initiatives focus on direct resistance, as in the case of protests against toxic waste dumps, or try to buffer the process, as in the case of the fight for *maquila* workers' rights, while others try to find and expand niches within the globalization process – for example, by building economically viable sustainable timber cooperatives, or creating new people-to-people “philanthropy from below” in the form of migrant hometown associations. The diverse cases documented here share a common thread, however – they are all stories of people in action, defending themselves and creating alternatives. Read on, to find out more about the multiple meanings of resistance in Mexico today.

Disentangling winners and losers

This book is quite different from most of the literature on Mexican economic integration. The NAFTA debate witnessed a huge ‘battle of the studies.’ Each side in the debate combined volumes of data with strategic sound bites, thanks in part to the interest groups and private foundations across the spectrum that invested in advocacy research. Some kinds of research counted more than others, though, because the media gave the most credibility to the conventional macroeconomic modeling methods that dominate the U.S. economics profession. These models deployed sophisticated economic techniques, but their results were often determined primarily by their basic starting assumptions, such as how many jobs in Mexican corn production would be displaced by increased imports from the U.S. – if jobs in corn production were taken into account at all.

Critics fired back with case studies of specific sectors, vivid images of toxic waste and deformed babies at the border, as well as journalistic profiles of individual workers ‘whose jobs had moved to Mexico.’ The NAFTA opposition certainly had its own contingent of expert specialists, but the dominant frame of the debate was quite lop-sided - between “expert” and “local knowledges.” Now, after almost a decade of NAFTA in action, both alternative experts and the strategists behind local alternatives are on stronger intellectual ground, based on a sustained track record of practice. Their real world experience gives the new research that follows a powerful comparative advantage – these authors know better than armchair policy analysts what economic integration has meant to specific social actors, in specific sectors, in specific places.

What happened after NAFTA went into effect? Investors kept investing, leading to more but not better *maquila* jobs. Migrants kept migrating, continuing to seek a better life on the border and points north. But what about the major questions about jobs and the environment that dominated the public and research debates a decade ago? Curiously, the level of research attention to Mexico-U.S. economic integration dropped off significantly once the NAFTA vote was over. There are few studies that follow up on the many conflicting predictions to see which ones actually held up, though much of the available literature agrees that economic integration has fallen short of its promises.

Causal stories

When assessing winners and losers from economic integration, the central insight to keep in mind is that one should not look for answers in terms of countries – whether Mexico, Canada, or the U.S. benefited.

² For further discussion of this point, see David Brooks and Jonathan Fox, eds., Cross-Border Dialogues: Mexico US Social Movement Networking, La Jolla: University of California, San Diego, Center for US-Mexican Studies, 2002 (in press) and Jonathan Fox, “Evaluación de las coaliciones binacionales de la sociedad civil a partir de la experiencia México-Estados Unidos,” Revista Mexicana de Sociología, 63(3), 2001 [www.us-mex.org/bios/pdf/index_docs.html]

Instead, one must look at specific sectors, regions, social classes, groups of workers, natural resources – as well as visions of alternative futures. Does NAFTA make alternative futures more or less viable? The answers depend on whom one asks. As one of the leaders of the resistance to Mexico City’s proposed new airport suggests, globalization unmask the system, which in turn can embolden and empower resistance by revealing both allies and opponents. At the same time, globalization sometimes poses a challenge by blurring the picture of who is doing what to whom. Local *maquila* managers or crop buyers can blame anonymous international market forces, international financial authorities can blame national policy-makers for not following all their prescriptions, environmental regulators can pass the buck, while national policy-makers can sidestep critics by pointing the finger at supposedly all-powerful international agencies.

How are grassroots actors supposed to figure out where to invest their limited political capital, and how to target their campaigns? Here “causal stories” play a key role – accessible narratives that synthesize both the perpetrators and possible pathways to solutions.³ In the cases that follow here, for example, we have several examples of campaigns that embody such “causal stories.” They include both campaigns to *block* deeper economic integration by the *campesino-ecologista* forest defenders and bio-prospecting critics and efforts to *transform* the terms of integration into international markets, like the creative campaigns of Mexico’s many indigenous coffee cooperatives. Case studies of grassroots initiatives can play a key role by helping to demystify and explain broader processes, by highlighting the potential power of agency in the face of seemingly all-powerful pressures, and by pinpointing how to most effectively channel anger and advocacy to specific targets or pressure points.

Clearly, there has been increased social polarization within Mexico between those included in and excluded from the dominant economic model. At the same time, significant islands of change and resistance survive. But how large are they? How resilient will they be? Will they be able to grow, spread and form interconnected archipelagos? Will the islands of alternatives be able to join forces and constitute new political counterweights that could affect the national balance of power? Will the two main paths of resistance – protest and proposals for alternatives – manage to reinforce each other? To sum up, when it comes to grassroots responses to economic integration, we still don’t know much about what works, and why – just that we should be wary of “one-size-fits-all” approaches. That is why it is so important to have serious empirical research on the actors themselves, and why this book makes such an important contribution to answering these questions.

³ This point draws from a suggestion made by Mimi Keck, co-author of Activists Beyond Border (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998). personal communication (August 2, 2002)