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Carlos Fuentes | A New Time for Mexico

## Carlos Fuentes on the Mexican Crisis

Carlos Fuentes began writing this collection of essays on Mexico's current political and economic crisis in 1994, which he refers to as "The Year of Living Dangerously." He puts Mexico's recent problems, which include the Chiapas rebellion, the assassinations of Luis Donaldo Colosio and Francisco Ruiz Massieu, economic crises, drug scandals, and more, into a historical and cultural context and offers prescriptions for change, which he deems necessary if Mexico is to survive as a sovereign nation.

Fuentes sets the stage for a discussion of 1994 and beyond with a lyrical, somewhat mystical characterization of Mexico. He describes its grandeur, its riches, and the "four suns" (Earth, Clouds, Wind, and Fire) that shaped it. "Mexico," he says, "is a portrait of the cycles of creation, a portrait of the skies and a succession of suns and elements that give no quarter. The portrait of the Mexicans is the portrait of creation" (p. 13). It is for that reason, Fuentes insists, that Mexicans accept whatever life offers, that they do not deny "any reality," but instead attempt to integrate that reality into the culture through their art, their dreams, their language, their music.

Among Fuentes' major themes in these essays is the tension between permanence and transience, between old and new. Many of Mexico's current problems are due to the fact that its leaders have attempted to modernize while ignoring the people and traditions of the past. For Mexicans, he argues, the present and the past are inseparable. He discounts the possibility of linear time in Mexico, asserting that Mexicans "are one seamless civ-

ilization from Quetzalcoatl to Pepsicoatl" (p. 22). The issue of permanence is raised again in Fuentes' essay on Mexico's indigenous peoples. He depicts this population as "other," but also "mine." All Mexicans must recognize that Indians are part of them, of their identity and heritage, and must therefore work to ensure justice for that population. Mexico's Indians, says Fuentes, "are the only aristocrats in a country of provincial imitations, shabby colonial hidalgos, haughty republican Creoles, and corrupt, cruel, and ignorant revolutionary bourgeois" (p. 33).

For Fuentes, the Revolution has been betrayed but is still the basis of modern Mexican culture. Interestingly, he bases his discussion of the events and meaning of the Revolution on the work of a U.S. historian, John Mason Hart, which he says "goes a long way toward dispelling myths and clarifying the process of Mexican history" (p. 36). Fuentes describes three separate "revolutions," including an "agrarian, small-town movement," (that of Villa and Zapata), a "national, centralizing, and modernizing revolution" (led by Madero, Carranza, and the Sonorans), and the modernizing revolution that displaced the country's "traditional artisanal class." In the end, the second revolution triumphed and established "the institutions of modern Mexico" (p. 36). Fuentes' assertion that the Revolution continues to shape national identity and culture and the "collective psyche" is surprising given the fact that many Mexicans, including former President Carlos Salinas de Gortari, for whom Fuentes expresses great admiration, apparently long ago declared the Revolution dead.

Among the most valuable essays in *A New Time for Mexico* is a discussion of the assassination of Ruben Jaramillo, an activist in the 1950s and 1960s in the state of Morelos, by local power brokers. Jaramillo was the president of the board that ran a sugar mill set up as a cooperative in the 1930s by Lazaro Cardenas. His efforts on behalf of the workers got him in trouble with local political bosses and he and his family were brutally murdered as result. In 1962 Fuentes and several other Mexican writers conducted interviews with those who knew Jaramillo best, and the portrait that emerged is touching and important in that it puts a human face on the political gangsterism that Fuentes rails against in these essays.

Fuentes' primary object of criticism in this work is Mexico's political system. In an effort to help the reader understand the current crisis, he once again places the workings of the Mexican political machine in a historical context. "Call it tradition, call it the past, call it, even better, the tension between past and present, between tradition and renewal—this is the way the heart of Mexican history beats. Its systole and diastole have been, on the one hand, a centralizing, conservative, authoritarian, religious impulse, and on the other, a decentralizing, modernizing, secular, and democratic impulse" (p. 61). Fuentes also suggests that Mexico's political tradition has been further defined by the idea that the good of the community supersedes that of the individual, which emerged from the "political school" of Saint Thomas Aquinas, i.e., Catholic doctrine, but the values of the community are determined by "one man—the monarch—in the name of all" (p. 62). He links this historical force with a second, Roman law and politics, specifically the manner in which the Caesar demanded allegiance and secured it largely through pitting one political entity against another. These forces have worked together, charges Fuentes, to shape Mexican political practices until today. "The unwritten Lex Trebonia of the Mexican Caesars ... created a powerful official bureaucracy, promoted entrepreneurial and worker organizations, and manipulated all three in favor of the executive's political power" (p. 69).

With the creation of the predecessor of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) in 1929, the Mexican Caesars had a mechanism for fulfilling the promise of the Revolution. As time passed, however, the emphasis shifted and the businessman triumphed. Mexico prospered, but rigidity set in and the country was divided into two distinct groups: "a modern or modernizing nation, relatively prosperous and satisfied with the Mexican miracle, and a poor, isolated second nation, whose

only miracle ... was to stay alive and hope for a winning ticket in the lottery" (p. 74). But it is at this point, according to Fuentes, that a new hope appeared on the horizon: a new society, which emerged from below at municipal, state, and regional levels, and was not "determined from above." It brought the potential for change, for saving the country. A number of the essays in this book refer to the "civil society" of Mexico, which Fuentes presents as the hope of the future.

Fuentes discusses at length the problems of 1994, providing an almost month-by-month analysis of political violence, assassinations, corruption and lawlessness. The year begins with the uprising in Chiapas, which Fuentes blames on the PRI's highly centralized, authoritarian nature, which encourages corrupt and incompetent leadership at the local level. But Chiapas also revealed another weakness, that is "the deep-rooted racism and intolerance" in Mexico. Fuentes reports hearing "many people of Mexican high society ... call for the liquidation, the silencing, of Chiapas's workers" (p. 91). He seems to be speaking to this element when he calls for justice for such subgroups and praises many of the local people in Chiapas for their wisdom, insight, and nobility. Yet Fuentes does not support the methods of the rebels, and in a letter he sent to Subcommander Marcos, which he includes in this volume, Fuentes denounces their lawless tactics and criticizes Marcos' "absurd" suggestion that Salinas resign.

Fuentes' 1994 chronicle reveals growing frustration and anger at the PRI and in this regard he was likely influenced by his cohorts in the so-called San Angel group, a collection of Mexican writers and intellectuals who met regularly to discuss their concerns during that volatile year. Salinas, Colosio, and Ernesto Zedillo, among others, met with the San Angel group at various points and Fuentes credits the actions of this and other associations, such as the Civil Alliance, with the peaceful elections of 1994. Fuentes hints that elements within the PRI were responsible for the deaths of Colosio and Massieu. He is not a supporter of Zedillo, mainly because of his "extreme neoliberalism, his monetarist and utilitarian criteria, his lack of interest in universal public education" (p. 100).

In these essays, Fuentes repeatedly calls for sweeping political reforms, beginning with the separation of the Mexican government from "Jurassic Park," which is how he refers to the PRI. Further, a system of checks and balances must be implemented, separation of powers must take place, and the justice system reformed. The practice of *dedazo*, the selection of the next presidential candidate by the current president, "can no longer be endured"

(p. 112). Mexico should undertake democratic reform like that which took place in post-Franco Spain with the 1977 Moncloa Accords. Among other changes he calls for are “impartial electoral authorities, trustworthy electoral rolls, access to the media [for all candidates], spending limits, a ban on the use of government resources for partisan purposes, and prosecution of electoral offenses” (p. 93).

Fuentes also recommends reform of the Partido Revolucionario Democrática, the PRD, in order to “pursue its struggle from positions closer to the electorate and thereby weaken the government” (p. 112). His most startling suggestion, however, is that “the best” elements within the PRI work together with the best within the Partido Acción Nacionalista (PAN), and the PRD. But the “real answer to Mexico’s political needs,” claims Fuentes, “is a left-of-center social democratic party along the lines of the German, French, or Spanish model” (p. 169).

Another theme of these essays is that Mexico’s civil society must take political action. He includes in this cohort indigenous movements, rural credit unions, collective-interest associations, and leagues of communal production, among others. Such organizations have proven able to govern at the community level, argues Fuentes, and he urges the central government to allow them to do so, for Mexico must move inexorably toward a democracy.

Fuentes suggests that relations with the United States, both political and economic, contribute to Mexico’s current situation. He is critical of U.S. policy relating to border issues, drugs, and the “rescue package,” which, he complains, did nothing to put the Mexican economy back on its feet, but merely permitted the country to keep up with its debt payments. Surprisingly, he was more critical of Mexican than U.S. leaders for signing the NAFTA accord. In his prescriptions for economic change, Fuentes quotes outsiders Peter Drucker and Alvin Toffler.

In the end, Fuentes cites two potentially explosive problems for Mexico: the “fracture” between northern and southern Mexico, which is to a large extent the result of the second problem, a lack of justice and democracy. He warns that if Mexicans do not give themselves democracy, its absence may “serve the U.S. and its nationalism ... as a pretext to impose its own politics on us” (p. 201). But Fuentes is hopeful, given his faith in the Mexican people, whom he says have a “genius for survival.” Returning to his theme, he says that Mexico has “a population that ... is the result of tensions between

opposites—old and new country, eternally seduced by the past and the future, by the traditional and the modern. In the exceptional moments of our history, we have been able to face both, looking clearly at the past, admitting what we are, embracing our cultural totality” (p. 201). The country will not disintegrate, he argues, because of the national identity and unity that he says developed as result of the Revolution.

*A New Time for Mexico* has been billed as an “insider’s” view of Mexico’s current problems. But Fuentes is hardly an insider, having lived outside the country for much of his life. One wonders for whom Fuentes wrote this book and why. His suggestions for change are hardly new; in fact, he credits others for most of his prescriptions. He has been criticized for the incessant name dropping of prominent Mexicans in this book, and this fact, combined with essays on his Mexican and Spanish roots, could lead to speculation that this book constitutes an effort to become a Mexican insider. He seems to be justifying his choice to live abroad when he says, “Many members of my generation served Mexico abroad with distinction.... We saw it as our duty to persevere in the defense of our principles, supporting the rights of the weak against the aggressions of the strong” (p. 186). Is this an attempt to present his credentials, to bond with other Mexicans in criticizing U.S. policy, and to demonstrate his efforts to save the country? If so, one wonders why he relies on U.S. and other foreign specialists in matters of Mexican history and political and economic policy.

Fuentes’ recommendations for reform in Mexico appear to be a hodge podge of formulas pulled from a variety of sources. Some suggestions contradict one of his major themes, that change cannot take place while ignoring Mexico’s heritage and traditions. For example, his recommendation that elements of the PRI, the PAN, and the PRD work together is unreasonable given the history and bases of political divisions that have characterized the Mexican past. And his suggestion that the PRI reform itself and allow more local self-government is surprising given his explanation of Scholastic and Augustinian authoritarianism as a basis of Mexico’s political system.

The value of *A New Time for Mexico* is its recapitulation of recent events in Mexico (for those who have not kept up), and that it offers some insight into efforts on the part of some Mexicans to bring about change. While Fuentes’ solutions seem unworkable, it is interesting to see how he and (by implication) other intellectuals would effect change in that troubled land.

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