

MEXICO'S CENTENNIALS

Cárdenas: Making and Teaching History

by Jude Joffe-Block

Mexico is facing troubling times. The nation's GDP dropped 6.8 percent in 2009. A challenging war on drug trafficking has sparked a new era of violence and claimed more than 22,000 lives since 2006. Nearly half the country lives in poverty. Is this the Mexico that Francisco Madero and Emiliano Zapata, the protagonists of the Mexican Revolution, envisioned?

Exactly 100 years ago, revolutionaries disenchanted with the status quo overthrew the dictator Porfirio Díaz and struggled to build a new government. In his talk for the Center for Latin American Studies, Mexican political leader Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas described their mobilization as “a social reaction against a change-resistant system... Nothing seemed to move in Mexico, apparently everything remained immobile, people were tired, disenchanted, irritated.”

A vision of democracy, equality, justice, education and progress kindled the various movements that broke out in 1910. While those revolutionary ideals helped shape the 1917 Constitution, the aspirations of the revolution's protagonists were never fully attained, said Cárdenas, who has been described by some as “the father of the Mexican left.” Many of the revolutionary era goals remain unfulfilled a century later, and Cárdenas argued that Mexico can and should begin a renewed fight to fulfill them.

Harley Shaiken, Chair of Berkeley's Center for Latin American Studies introduced Cárdenas to the audience of over 400 by stating that when it came to selecting a speaker to discuss the legacy of the Mexican Revolution, he could think of no one “more appropriate, more fitting” than Cárdenas.

Indeed, Cárdenas, who was born in 1934, just months before his father was elected president of Mexico, is personally linked to some of the most critical moments and developments in modern Mexican history.

His father's presidency is considered by many analysts to have been the era in which the greatest number of revolutionary promises were fulfilled. Land redistribution — a chief priority of Emiliano Zapata's revolutionary faction — more than doubled under the Lázaro Cárdenas administration.

President Cárdenas was also responsible for the expropriation of foreign-owned oil companies and the nationalization of the oil industry in 1938, a move the

younger Cárdenas called “the most important feat of revolutionary policy.” Cárdenas peppered his lecture with insights about his father's decision to take that historic step and shared the reflections that his father recorded in his personal diary at the time.

Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas followed his father into politics, becoming a senator and later a governor of the state of Michoacán. He held these posts as a member of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (Institutional Revolutionary Party, PRI), a later incarnation of the party his father founded, which governed Mexico without interruption for over 71 years. But in the 1980s, Cárdenas was among a faction of politicians who began to clash with the PRI.

In his lecture, Cárdenas said that if one were to fast-forward from the start of his father's administration in 1934 to the year 1982, it would mean transitioning from a system committed to the revolution's ideals to one that “consistently and consciously” took action against revolutionary works, legislation and institutions.

Disillusioned, Cárdenas advocated for a more democratic political process. In 1987, he was among a group of PRI politicians who left the party to form the National Democratic Front, a precursor to the Partido de la Revolución Democrática (Party of the Democratic Revolution, PRD), which is the country's largest center-left party today. He became the new party's presidential nominee in 1988 but lost to the PRI candidate, Carlos Salinas de Gortari, in what is widely recognized to be among the most fraudulent elections in Mexican history. As a three-time presidential candidate and mayor of Mexico City under the PRD banner, Cárdenas' efforts helped pave the way for major electoral reforms that allowed opposition parties to gain ground, mandated fairer elections and ultimately ended the PRI's single-party rule.

While Mexican elections did become significantly more democratic by the late 1990s, Cárdenas maintained that true democracy has yet to be achieved. “What the Mexican people have been fighting for is not only to assure that the vote of every citizen is fully respected,” he said. “Democracy is that and much more — it is equality, and Mexican society is one of the most unequal in the world.” Democracy also entails such principles as social welfare, economic growth, job opportunities and access to knowledge, he added, all areas where Mexico is lacking.



Photo by Beth Perry.

Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas (center) with (from left) José Narro Robles, Rector of UNAM; Enrique del Val; Jose Luis Talancón; and Harley Shaiken.

Acknowledging that the global economic crisis is partially responsible for Mexico's ills, Cárdenas still insisted that three decades of misguided public policies are the root cause of the country's current conditions.

In response to a question from the audience about what public policies should be a priority for Mexican leaders in 2010, Cárdenas rattled off a checklist of needed reforms.

First on the list was reducing inequality, a goal he said could be advanced by making social security universal.

Another priority would be to renegotiate the provisions of the North American Free Trade Agreement and to enact other agricultural reforms that would make it easier for rural families to support themselves by farming.

A third would be to improve U.S.–Mexico relations, including negotiating a better border policy, increasing opportunities at home so Mexicans are not forced to migrate and encouraging the U.S. to curb the demand for drugs as part of its shared responsibility for combating drug trafficking.

In a radio interview for the San Francisco public radio show, “Forum,” on the day of his lecture, Cárdenas explained that the modern movement he envisions would have some key differences from the upheaval that occurred in 1910. “We are not talking of a violent

revolution,” he told the show's host, Michael Krasny. “We have to strengthen the progressive sectors in Mexico. We have to get much more organized; we have to get people to participate more actively in politics.”

Cárdenas' semester at Berkeley is the culmination of many years of collaboration with the Center for Latin American Studies. A participant in the U.S.–Mexico Future's Forum since 2006, he was a visiting professor at Berkeley for the 2010 spring semester, teaching a course on the legacy and promise of the revolution. He also taught a month-long course on Mexico's democratic transition at UC Berkeley in 2006. “It is very interesting to be with young people and see what they are thinking about,” he said in an interview, noting that being a professor entails “a different kind of pressure” from other jobs he has held.

Cuauhtémoc Cardenas is one of the founders of the Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD) and served as mayor of Mexico City from 1997-99. He gave a talk titled, “The Promise and Legacy of the Mexican Revolution,” at UC Berkeley on Feb 3, 2010.

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