

# AMLO's Mexican Time (Business Is Good!)

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**M**y father was a seismologist. One of his favorite anecdotes from graduate school concerned one of his professors, Charles Richter—who, together with Beno Gutenberg, created the famous Richter scale. According to my dad, whenever there was a good, strong earthquake somewhere, Richter would run to the seismographs, excitedly rubbing his hands together, and exclaim: “Business is good!”

The lesson was that disasters are relative, and one person's tragedy is another person's business.

Andrés Manuel López Obrador's historically obsessed presidency has put many historians in Richter's position. Mexico's leader, known as AMLO, constantly alludes to one historical grievance or another. Indeed, his government has cast itself as the culmination and resolution of the great struggle of the Mexican people. This conceit of national redemption might help explain why the president, whose grandparents came from Spain, felt authorized to demand that the Spanish monarch apologize for the Conquest. AMLO is there to redeem all of the nation's past wrongs. Rarely has a president been so confident of making history.

From the day of his inauguration, AMLO announced the dawn of a new era, one that he called the Fourth Transformation. National time, as it has long been taught in Mexico's schoolbooks, provides the relevant framework for such a formula. The so-called First Transformation corresponds to national independence (1810–20), and the Second Transformation to the Wars of Reform and against the French intervention (1857–67), whereas the Third Transformation refers to the Mexican Revolution (1910–20). AMLO thus casts himself as the leader of a movement that is the culmination and synthesis of a national historical dialectic.

The world historical currents that should help the nation's citizens get a handle on what is actually

going on in Mexico are thereby minimized or ignored. Rather, López Obrador is insistently and self-consciously provincial. He believes that each country should mind its own business. This quite popular anti-imperialist stance allows the president to channel the local effects of global economic processes into a self-serving and conveniently prepackaged nationalist rhetoric.

For instance, the government-led process of emancipation that is supposed to be taking place before our very eyes identifies neoliberalism as its antagonist, and the government emphatically frames itself as neoliberalism's opposite (whatever that may be). At the same time, AMLO is always at pains to identify neoliberalism with what he calls “neo-Porfirianism,” in reference to the modernizing dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz (1876–1911), thereby shoehorning neoliberalism into national time. (Porfiriato : Revolution :: Neoliberal Era : Fourth Transformation.) Since Mexican history textbooks have cast Díaz as a villain and the leaders of the revolution as heroes, AMLO's cyclical view of national time places his movement squarely on History's right side, while all of his opponents are neatly identified as defenders of a corrupt ancien régime.

In López Obrador's capable hands, national time has proved to be an efficient political instrument, but it can't do much to change Mexico's position in the world economy. National time is instead a device that serves to organize the internal political field into friends and enemies. AMLO claims that before his election to the presidency, Mexico had been misruled by the PRIAN, his mocking combination of the acronyms of the two parties that had taken turns governing Mexico since the country's democratic transition, the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) and the National Action Party (PAN). Thus he collapses any party that lies outside his coalition into an all-embracing ancien régime, even while the National Regeneration Movement (MORENA), the party that he created shortly before the 2018 elections, is teeming with old—indeed, often very old—ancien régime

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cadres. His governing coalition has such strange bedfellows as the Workers Party (which sympathizes with North Korea), the notoriously corrupt and not at all green Green Party, and the socially conservative, evangelical Social Encounter Party.

The political field is thus reduced to a confrontation between the two contrasting pedigrees, that of the eternal “enemies of the people” and that of “the people.” This simple operation allows AMLO to label his opponents as “conservatives,” regardless of the content of their dissent from his policies, while his allies are part of *el pueblo bueno*, the Good People, so long as they toe the party line. In today's Mexico, feminists, anti-militarists, and environmentalists have been called “conservatives,” lumped together with the Catholic right, while tycoons of dubious ethics, such as TV and migrant-remittance mogul Ricardo Salinas Pliego, have taken their seats alongside *el pueblo bueno*. AMLO has conferred upon himself the authority to pardon past wrongs and to welcome old strays back into the fold of the Good People, which explains why and how a number of old-time PRI operators, such as Manuel Bartlett, now director of the National Electric Company, have been offered positions of power.

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## NATIONALIST HUBRIS

There is nothing especially original in much of this. Populism relies on the opposition between an honest, oh-so-national, and well-meaning majority and a minuscule, rootless, and unpatriotic elite. It is by now a well-worn political strategy that is oriented to taking power, and subsequently to organizing the political field into friends and traitors (or “adversaries,” as AMLO most often calls them). Yet this adversarial strategy is one of the few props that the Mexican government can rely on at this time.

Many of AMLO's campaign promises have failed to materialize. Rather than achieving the promised GDP growth of 4 percent per year, the Mexican economy contracted a bit during his first year in office (even while the US economy grew at around 3 percent), and it has tanked since the onset of COVID-19, with an expected 9–10 percent shrinkage of GDP for 2020. Also, contrary to any other left-leaning government in what was once called Latin America's “Pink Wave,” AMLO has promoted stringent budget cuts in the public sector, even during the course of the pandemic.

His government has invested in three areas: direct cash transfer programs; the flailing national oil company PEMEX, whose constantly mounting debts might drag down Mexico's sovereign credit rating within the next year or two; and the military. Despite its investments in the latter, the AMLO government has failed to rein in violence and general insecurity, which was another key campaign promise. Meanwhile, its management of the pandemic has been pretty much on par with the United States' and Brazil's disastrous examples.

Taken together, all of this adds up to a very complicated political situation, with reduced institutional levers for processing a dizzying variety of social conflicts, ranging from #MeToo to environmental protests to the movement led by families of the 66,000 Mexicans who have disappeared since the start of the drug wars in 2006. The bipolar rhetoric produced by a simple manipulation of the national epic helps make the disparate foci of discontent somewhat more manageable. For now at least, the hackneyed national mythology, with its eternal good guys and bad guys, gives at least some semblance of order to the inchoate rumble of concerns that resound across Mexico's fractured and economically depressed geography.

The iconography that accompanies this strategy is also old-school, as one might expect. Upon taking office, AMLO changed the logo of the federal government, replacing the seal bearing an eagle and serpent with an image of five men (yet another instance of nationalism's hopeless entanglement with patriarchy). These men are, from left to right, José María Morelos and Miguel Hidalgo (representing the First Transformation), Benito Juárez (Second Transformation), and Francisco I. Madero and Lázaro Cárdenas (Third Transformation). The sequence implied that López Obrador was a national hero even before he had achieved anything: as the undisputed leader of the Fourth Transformation, he cast himself as a hero equal to the Mexican equivalents of Washington, Lincoln, and FDR. Not surprisingly, this has given rise to a personality cult.

As ever, though, nationalist hubris also has plenty of ridiculous moments, some of which bring to mind Woody Allen's film *Bananas*, in which the guerrilla leader of the imaginary

Republic of San Marcos immediately upon taking power declares that the country's official language, from that point forward, will be Swedish. In a similar spirit, on March 17, 2019, AMLO officially proclaimed that neoliberalism no longer existed in Mexico. His government celebrated this accomplishment by spending the better part of a year yielding to Donald Trump's outrageous demands for Mexico to use its newly founded National Guard to contain and detain Central American migrants, all in exchange for keeping alive the free trade agreement with the United States. But neoliberalism is dead.

The revival of the national fairy tale is also a way of papering over the fact that AMLO's movement does not have an ideology. MORENA has so far been unsuccessful in shaping itself into a true political party with a clear set of principles. Even while the party has recently issued an "Ethics Guide" that

shuns neoliberalism, in the same breath it enshrines the family rather than the state as Mexico's prime guarantor of social security, education, health care, and mutual aid.

None of this means that López Obrador is insincere in his opposition to neoliberalism. Indeed, for better or for worse, he has done much to undermine the institutional framework associated with that form of governance, while promoting an increasing politicization of the Mexican economy. Alongside this complicated politics of constant friction and negotiation, his obsession with national time is an instrument for an authoritarian exercise of power: given the lack of a real party to translate his vision into effective policies, it is ultimately up to the leader to distinguish between the good and the bad people.

For historians, though, it is undoubtedly the case that "business is good." ■