Contention and the Dynamics of Inequality in Mexico, 1910–2010

This book details how contentious politics – everyday as well as exceptional, local as well as national – that took place in three communal villages of Mexico alternately reproduced and reshaped inequality. Narrated and analyzed as instances of the general process of contention, these events took place during three key periods of Mexico's history: the 1910–20 Revolution, the Cold War period from the 1950s to the 1970s, and from the 1980s to the present. Together, these episodes of contention build and test a theory of the making and unmaking of inequality in theoretically ideal conditions, illustrating the dynamics of this all-pervasive facet of social organization.

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To Bob Alford
A mentor, and a friend
In memoriam

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Preface

Contentious politics is mostly focused on inequalities and on how, depending on vested interests, to expose and lessen them or to defend and enhance them, but also to seem to aim for the one goal while working indirectly for the other. The main outcome of contention is alternately to reproduce and to reshape the existing state of inequality. This book addresses those processes of contentious politics – everyday as well as exceptional, local as well as national – as they took place in three communal villages in Mexico. The actions, narrated and analyzed as particular instances of the general process of contention, occurred during three key periods of Mexico's history: the 1910–1920 Revolution, the Cold War period from the 1950s to the 1970s, and the time from the 1980s to the present day, during which the redistributive social reforms that the Revolution had yielded have silently been downgraded, then officially rolled back.

Eight episodes of contention form the core material of the book. The point of bringing these episodes to light is not to offer a general account of the extent of inequality in Mexico as a whole. Had that been the aim, a different selection of cases, and an altogether different study, would have been required: one that was more statistically representative but less dense theoretically and ethnographically of how the component processes unfolded in the different episodes.[1] The purpose of the present undertaking was to build and test a theory of the making and unmaking of inequality in ethnographically rich conditions, so that the dynamics of this all-pervasive facet of social organization could be observed and theorized in terms consonant with the specific conditions on the ground, yet also relevant to all societies.

[1] The task of assessing inequality for the whole country has already been carried out by Mexico's National Council for the Evaluation of Social Development Policies (Coneval 2008), an institution that has calculated the Gini coefficient for the whole country and for each state.

One hundred years after a revolution that redistributed land – at the time, the quintessential resource for the three quarters of the population then engaged in agriculture – a high level of inequality is still with us in Mexico, now disseminated throughout a society in which 60 percent of the population lives in cities of over 100,000 inhabitants. Today, the rural population, which has doubled in size since 1910, yet represents only 23 percent of the population, remains comparatively poor, and still suffers unequal treatment in countless spheres (education, health, housing, infrastructure, and so forth) as compared with other sectors of society. Yet contention occasionally still flares up, as in Ocotlán, in defense of claims that alternately call into question or defend the status quo.

Although inscribed from within the history of Mexico, this book tells a story composed of a collection of eight narratives, the implications of which go far beyond the borders of that country. Indeed, the financial crisis of the 2000s, which drove the world into recession, has shown the deep inequalities pervading the global capitalist world, as it has left millions jobless, many homeless, and many of those still with a job and housing feeling that life has become much more precarious. The challenge set for this book was to respect the specific eventful trajectory of the people it portrays, and of a country constructing its own history, while speaking in terms of a general theory that can be tested anywhere and at any time.

In the 1950s, when sociology in the United States defined the possibility and conditions of social order as the first paramount theoretical problem to be investigated, most of the scholars who contributed to this quest assumed that social order could only exist in environments that were virtually unchanging, so that order and stability became synonymous in the minds and writings of the postwar scholars. The reaction to this first stream of sociological theorizing by the following generation was to oppose it by focusing on the conflictive aspects of social life, thereby creating a deep rift between analyses focused on stable consensual dimensions of social order and those concentrating on conflictive ones understood to undermine social order.

The theoretical propositions developed and tested in the present book would not have been possible (or even conceivable) as long as stability and change, or order and conflict, were considered separate phenomena, and as long as scholars believed that they had to make an uncompromising choice between structural/contextual and motivational/agentic explanations of human conduct. It was not until the end of the twentieth century that new theoretical currents opened the door to the kind of theorizing and associated empirical research that broke with such priorist blinkers: contention theory developed by Charles Tilly and the group of scholars who worked and copublished with him until his untimely death; agency theory, which emerged and flourished both in Britain and the United States; and a very (for me) inspiring idea – found in the writings of several Latin Americanists, but never theoretically developed

(and much less tested) – of the notion that social order rests on an implicit "pact of domination" that apportions power and resources unequally.

The present book starts from the proposition that the dynamics of social order are both supportive and transformative of the status quo at any point in time. In this perspective, social order is constantly and ubiquitously challenged, as well as reinforced, by human actors in the pursuit of their interests and aspirations. It further proposes that the basic building block of social order, everywhere and at all times, except in the most primitive societies, is the unequal distribution of power and resources. Yet inequality is no rock-like reality of social life, so that pressures (from below as well as above) to change the rules by which it is dictated and culturally assimilated generate political contention, a process in which people living in their respective historical/cultural contexts participate either to resist such pressures or to be part of them. In a nutshell, this book pictures changes in various forms of inequality as produced by conscious and discursively adept people and collectives, particularly at historical junctures that can redefine these local and regional struggles as forces aiming to transform the set of rules – or pact of domination – by which various institutions and state agencies enforce and legitimize inequality. This micro/macro view allows us to address the question of whether or not all contentious politics, even short-lived contentious episodes of little apparent import outside of the local issues opposing contendents, do play a role in the dynamics of inequality, or if only widespread contentious conflagrations can alter or altogether transform inequalities inscribed in the social orders in which they are manifested.

Acknowledgments

All the friends, advisers, mentors, and critics who have accompanied and helped me through the long process that went from imagining to completing this book jointly contributed to the conception and realization of the study, and to the drafting of this book, so that despite my status as faculty in a relatively peripheral university, I was never alone in this quest.

My lifelong gratitude goes to Bob Alford, a friend and a mentor since we first met at the University of Wisconsin as student and adviser during the stormy 1960s, and in whose memory this book is dedicated. With him, I began to discuss, from the 1980s onward, the feasibility of using the notion of the pact of domination both as a theoretical tool and as an object of empirical research, during our periodic meetings either in New York City, in Mexico's beautiful mountainous *Valle de Bravo*, or in long walks in the millenary woods and sierras of northern California.

My heartfelt thanks also go to Chuck Tilly, whom I first knew in his macro-theoretical and historical comparative incarnation at the New School's Center for Studies of Social Change, which he created and directed, and later in his more micro-analytic phase at Columbia University. Chuck never stinted his advice, and his appreciation of what we, simple mortals, wrote. He helped me time and again to focus on processes and the dynamic parts that "propelled" them. The last words of advice he left me, which I treasure to this day, were "concentrate on the turning points."

I am also indebted to Guillermo O'Donnell, also recently departed, who throughout his life reiterated the importance of the State in every transformation of society, despite waning interest in that perspective in the US and elsewhere. Through his early writings while at Argentina's famed CEDES (an intellectual bunker that resisted a dictatorship of the worse kind), and conversations with him at the Kellogg Center for International Studies, he confirmed for me the idea that the historical trajectory of States in Latin

America had been primarily conditioned by their capacity to ensure respect for a pact of domination. For Guillermo, there was only one possible such pact – the capitalist pact of domination – and no pressures or counterpressures for change generated internally by inequality. But then, we can learn a great deal from those with whom we only partly agree or altogether disagree.

For reading draft after draft, untiredly making critiques and suggestions, and editing my sometimes unwieldy prose, I owe my greatest debt to Lawrence Hazelrigg, an undaunted theoretician, and a caring lover of beautiful plants, as I am. But for his generous help and constant moral support, this book would not have come to life.

I also owe special thanks to Javier Arteaga Pérez, Ph.D. student at El Colegio de México, for the ethnographic fieldwork which took two long years to complete, involving countless hours of wading through untidy agrarian archives, perusing often discontinued hard-to-find newspapers, and conducting in-depth interviews whose content had to be constantly complemented by additional visits and questions so as to satisfy the theoretical requirements of the study. Javier penetrated on my behalf into a man's world which no woman is allowed to enter, not even (perhaps especially not) those born and living in the three villages under research.

Lastly, I would like to thank my two anonymous reviewers, whose very challenging critiques helped me make this book a better one.