

A Mexican Storm is Brewing

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On the day that the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) came into force, January 1, 1994, a group of Mexican peasants marched out of the mountains and the jungles and directly into the media spotlight. President Carlos Salinas was celebrating Mexico's new status as a "first world" nation and was basking in the glory of his own sudden prominence alongside United States President Reagan and Canadian Prime Minister Mulroney. The peasants recognized NAFTA for the disaster that it was destined to be.

These were the so-called Zapatistas and their struggle has, in the minds of many, become parallel to the struggles of the Mexican agricultural community, or the "campesino" movement. There are hundreds of organizations in the Mexican farmers' movement, mostly with common concerns, but they have managed also to find an affinity with the Zapatistas. To be sure, neither the Zapatista nor the farmers' movements are solely about NAFTA but that agreement helped provide a clear and obvious rallying point.

A reasonable question for society to answer is whether there is a need for family farms in our economies. In general, Canadians and Americans would probably agree there is a need but in Mexico, it's not even a serious question: it would be very much like asking if the sky should remain up today, instead of trying down for a change. Mexico's economy cannot function effectively without the family farm; it is a millennia-old system that has been the backbone of the Mesoamerican economy and more than 25% of the Mexican population makes its living from agriculture. (For comparison, it is less than 2% in the U.S.)

When the deal was sold to North American citizens, farmers were assured that NAFTA was going to bring them higher prices. In Mexico, the opposite has occurred. Commodities are under-priced and farm income is below the cost of production. There are government subsidies but these benefit large industrial producers rather than cash croppers. Many of them have been forced off fertile land that was previously guaranteed to them by the Mexican government because of privatization pressures. In addition, with the elimination of most agricultural tariffs, U.S. products have flooded Mexican markets and further degraded the prices paid to native farmers. Recent estimates show that Mexican farmers earn an average of 35

cents a day.

Despite "primitive" farming techniques, Mexico was largely self-sufficient in basic grains production before NAFTA. But today, it is importing about 95% of its soy, 58% of its rice, and 49% of its wheat. White corn is the staple of the Mexican diet and it is the crop most campesinos grow, but Mexico now imports about six million tons of white corn every year.

One of the goals of the campesino movement in Mexico is the renegotiation of at least the agricultural portions of NAFTA. Unfortunately, this will never happen. There is a mechanism for changing NAFTA contained in Chapter 22 of the agreement. It seems relatively benign in that all it requires is for one country to call for a renegotiation, which must then be discussed and agreed upon by all three countries. The problem lies in the fact that NAFTA is not a tool of government, it is a tool of industry. Neither Mexico nor the other two parties can alter this agreement without the concurrence of major industrial players, and industry has no interest in reopening the agreement unless it is to allow themselves to assume even more power and authority from government and the people.

One of the things that makes agriculture different in Mexico as compared to Canada and the United States is the high percentage of farmers who are Indians. (For ease of use, I will use the word "Indian" to include the various Mayan and non-Mayan indigenous peoples.) There has long been simmering resentment between those Indian farmers and Mexico City although, quite frankly, many consider themselves to be Indian first, Yucatecan second, Mexican third. At the same time, there is overt racism toward the Indians in much the same way there is in Canada and the United States. But as a fairly homogenized subclass of workers (farmers), the Mexican Indians are readily marginalized. It is a small leap for them to see NAFTA as racially discriminatory. They easily miss the fact that NAFTA was designed to snooker all of us, not just them.

In many ways, it is difficult to separate the aspirations of the Zapatistas from the campesinos; even when ethnicity isn't an issue, poverty is. Farmers are farmers; that's what they want to do and they want to be able to do it in peace and with the ability to earn enough to feed and house their families. Social status and political power would be nice, but being able to eat and live are more important.

The Zapatista movement, at least according to its nominal spokesperson, Subcomandante Marcos, is not a political movement out to seize power. It is truly a revolutionary movement intended to transform society. It sees the peasants of Mexico as its constituency and there is little doubt that the continued frustration of efforts to improve the lot of Mexican farmers is almost sure to result in action. Given the intransigence of the federal government and its complete emasculation by NAFTA, the World Trade Organization, International Monetary Fund, etc., it is almost a certainty that such action is going to be bloody.

During an interview I gave to a Mexican newspaper in March 2003 regarding an article I published on economics, I took the opportunity to interview the reporter

about the Mexican farmers' movement. As it happens, although he is based in northern Mexico, he is originally from one of the states that makes up the Yucatán region of Mexico, home of the Zapatista movement. He spoke eloquently and passionately about the downtrodden Mexican peasants (he is not one himself) and he predicted that there will eventually be a solid alliance between the Zapatistas and many of the farmers' groups. He also predicted that the federal government is powerless to address their concerns, even in the unlikely circumstance that they would want to, owing to NAFTA. And finally, he says there is sure to be a civil war.

From the outside, Mexico may just look like a poor country full of second-rate citizens. It seems to be a sleepy land of sombreros, salsa, and siestas. In fact, it is a very divided country with a wide range of social and political aspirations that make it anything but stable. Some day, the siesta may be over and those disparate and desperate groups may finally rise up to take charge of their destinies. If that happens, all those Canadian and American enterprises that moved their business facilities to Mexico to avoid giving safe working conditions and decent wages to their employees may find those employees running for their lives. It is almost certain to be the farmers who will lead the charge and NAFTA will have been among the last straws.

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