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## LAYING THE FOUNDATIONS

Glorious Mexico City, once known as the city of palaces, is now gasping for breath in a sea of people, poverty, and pollution. Though the reasons are many, distinguished author and activist Octavio Paz echoes common sentiment when he blames Mexico's political leaders for this insufferable situation. He chastises the ruling party for its incapacity to foresee the disastrous consequences of what he considers a thoughtless cult of out-and-out development and industrialization. Paz minces no words in his indictment: "As they were intent on 'modernizing' the country, none of [Mexico's] rulers—all of them surrounded by 'expert' counselors and ideologists—realized in time the perils of the population's excessive and uncontrolled growth. . . . Nor did

they take measures against the demographic, political, economic, and cultural centralization that has converted Mexico City into a monstrous inflated head, crushing the frail body that holds it up."<sup>1</sup>

To those familiar with Mexico and its capital city, Paz's words ring true. Worse than a planner's nightmare, Mexico City is a depressing testament to administrative chaos and the excesses of rapid and concentrated industrial development. Since initiating industrial development in the 1940s, Mexico's capital has been transformed from a charming city with wide boulevards, an almost leisurely lifestyle, and a population of around 1.8 million to a living hell with nearly 16 million residents in the metropolitan area.<sup>2</sup> It is now neck and neck with Tokyo for the dubious honor of being the world's largest city, and it shows in the daily disorder of urban life. Clearly the capital city was not always this way. Yet because Mexico's ruling political party, the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), concentrated national investments and industrial infrastructure in this central locale, Mexico City grew by leaps and bounds. Between the 1940s and 1960s, the capital city more than doubled in size as it proudly showcased the nation's economic growth. The capital came to be synonymous with seemingly unlimited employment opportunities, wealth, and urban and economic development. By the early sixties, Mexico City boasted Latin America's first skyscraper, rising standards of living, a sophisticated cultural life, and some of the developing world's most modern urban amenities, including a gleaming new rapid transit system. The economy flowered and the capital city sparkled as the symbol of the country's successful confrontation with modernity; in turn, Mexico's citizens lent relatively solid political support to the PRI and its one-party rule.

Almost as rapidly as it came, however, this urban-based miracle turned around. By the late 1970s and early 1980s, Mexico's import-substitution industrialization strategy had reached a point of saturation, and so too had Mexico City. Local officials were hard-pressed to meet the administrative demands of the monstrous city. In the capital, where most industries were located, investment and productivity declined precipitously, spurred by an economic crisis associated with massive foreign debt obligations and skyrocketing urban infrastructure expenditures incurred in the process of rapid industrialization. Visible changes in the capital city's social, spatial, and political landscape, in short, chronicled both the nation's rapid ascent and its apparent decline. Near-lethal levels of pollution from industrial firms that had made the industrialization miracle possible were strangling the local population. By 1990, as ozone levels reached dangerous heights, the government was routinely closing schools and factories and systematically restricting automobile usage with an elaborate system of vehicle permits. The overconcentration

of vehicles, population, and industry also produced severe scarcities in urban services. With high demand and limited fiscal resources, critical services like electricity, water, housing, and public transportation became almost too costly for the government to administer or provide, at least at the rate demanded by this ever-expanding metropolis and its impoverished residents.

In response to these service scarcities, increased pollution, skyrocketing expenditures, and other urban and administrative problems associated with unlimited urban growth, Mexico City's residents have ever more frequently taken to the streets and made vocal demands on ruling party leaders to address deteriorating urban conditions. However, the economic crisis has imposed strict limits on social expenditures, and because of the sheer enormity of the problem, little has been accomplished. As a consequence, over the past decade or so well-organized networks of urban social movements in the capital city have boldly challenged the ruling party and its monopoly on urban policy decisions. And the results have been formidable: The PRI can no longer easily count on social or electoral support in Mexico City, where several autonomous urban social movements are demanding democracy and laying a solid foundation for the development of a more competitive political system. In the 1988 presidential election, for example, opposition candidate Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas carried Mexico City and sent shockwaves through the PRI by challenging its political hegemony in the capital and the nation at large. Although Cárdenas repudiated the PRI for numerous shortcomings, urban problems and the incapacity of local residents to make critical decisions about urban services in Mexico City, owing to the absence of local democratic institutions, were among the most critical and widely discussed issues in his campaign. Since then, the PRI has been quick to address the political fallout from the Cárdenas challenge. This was first evidenced in a 1989 symposium sponsored by the Mexico City mayor's office that committed the PRI to exploring the relationship between democracy and urban development in the Mexico City metropolitan area. Among the most-discussed issues were planning, democracy, participation, and quality of life; urban expansion and the transformation of local and national political institutions; and the urban policy platforms of Mexico's ruling and opposition parties.

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#### CITY, CLASS, AND CORPORATISM: AN OVERVIEW

So what accounts for Mexico City's rise as a gigantic and overpopulated industrial center, one that sustained the political and economic successes of an entire nation? And why have we seen such a dramatic reversal of fortune

in the last two decades, such that Mexico City's growth and administration have themselves become serious problems? What are the implications for both local and national politics, especially the power of the PRI and the future of one-party rule in Mexico? To ask these questions is to seek the origins of the capital city's urbanization patterns and to consider their interrelationship with industrialization and national political development. Of course, one cannot comprehensively address all the multiple determinants of political and economic development in Mexico, urbanization-related or otherwise, in a single account. But it is possible to pose a more narrowly defined set of leading questions that help us understand these big structures and large processes, as Charles Tilly would call them: What explains the rapid and uncontrolled urban development of Mexico City over the past seventy years, and how have administrative practices and urban development policies introduced in the capital during this time period been influenced by—and in turn influenced—local and national politics?

By posing these questions, I share Octavio Paz's concern for linking Mexico's political history and many of its current political problems to the growth and dynamics of its capital city. Yet I use a slightly different theoretical perspective to untangle urban and political dynamics. Rather than pin the blame only on Mexico's political leaders, their personal ideologies of development, or their modernist biases toward industrialization and urbanization, I argue that Mexico City's urban development patterns—and their political consequences—are rooted in historically grounded conflicts and alliances among state and class actors; these conflicts and alliances have both produced and emerged in response to efforts to manage the servicing, land use, and growth of the capital city, as well as to control local politics. Furthermore, I argue that these conflicts and alliances are made particularly troublesome and consequential by one characteristic that differentiates this city's experience from many others': the fact that Mexico City is also its nation's political and economic capital. Mexico City is home not just to so-called "local" populations, or residents concerned with the production and consumption of their everyday lives. It is also home to national political institutions and actors with national constituencies and national developmental concerns. Indeed, Mexico City hosts most of the nation's foreign and domestic investment, the nation's largest concentration of both working and middle classes, the headquarters of the ruling party, and all three corporatist structures for national political participation.

All this means that political conflicts over Mexico City's administration and urban development have engaged national-level state and class actors and institutions as much as local ones. Precisely because Mexico City is

the political and economic center of the nation, in fact, Mexico's leaders have denied the capital's local residents their own independent structures for democratic participation, in order to prevent residents with neighborhood or other more parochial concerns from interfering with urban administrative goals and national development plans. This, in turn, has meant that until recently, Mexico City's populations have been forced to use national political structures to express local concerns. As a result, policy conflicts and administrative decisions about the growth, nature, and spatial or sectoral character of Mexico City have had direct repercussions on the national economy, on national corporatist political structures, and on the balance of power in national politics. Depending on whether they were more concerned with the local or national domains, and depending on their allegiances to specific classes or class-based sectors within the party, Mexico's national political leadership has frequently come to blows with local populations over Mexico City's development, thereby irreparably dividing the PRI. The results have been clear: a slow but steady weakening of state power vis-à-vis Mexico City populations and growing tension within and between its class-based corporatist sectors, especially as the city grows out of control.

In view of the unique overlap of local and national dynamics in Mexico, the politics of urban development that I explore in this book play themselves out on two levels simultaneously: the local, or urban, and the national domain. One of the main propositions I advance is that it is precisely the political and economic interrelationships between local and national actors and institutions that have produced Mexico City's disastrous urban development trajectories. A second proposition is that this unique set of interrelationships links administrative and policy decisions about urban development in Mexico City to several fundamental institutional transformations in the corporatist political system. To make these claims is not to say that conflicts over servicing and administration in Mexico City have been the *sole* determinants of national political transformations within the PRI and Mexico's incorporated political system. Outside the capital city, rural populations and changing relationships within and between peasants and the state have also played a part in either supporting or challenging the ruling party and its macroeconomic policy positions. So too have capitalists and laboring populations in other regions and even outside the nation's borders. Nor is it to argue that within Mexico City itself class dynamics or struggles in the workplace, especially as they produce tensions and relationships between capital and labor, are inconsequential or secondary to urban administrative and policy concerns. Clearly, tensions between capitalists and Mexico's working classes have worried Mexico's political leaders and influenced many of the PRI's most important political and

economic policy decisions, both on the local and the national level. What I do claim, however, is that conflicts over services and administration in Mexico City have involved the nation's most critical state and class actors, including capitalists and the working class; they have involved national-level actors and institutions; and both these sets of conflicts have had national political repercussions, not just local, urban ones.

Just as no study of the politics of urban development in Mexico City is complete without an understanding of the ways that national actors involve themselves in local struggles over urban policy, either in conflict or alliance with local actors, then, no study of national politics or corporatism in Mexico would be complete without an eye to the conflicts and alliances that emerge in the course of struggles over urban development in its capital city. Of course, in the complex whole under study in this book, it is easier to understand urban development trajectories within the context of the national political scene than to understand the national political dynamics of corporatism within the context of conflicts over Mexico City's growth and servicing. Nonetheless, this should not—and will not—stop us from using an examination of local and national conflicts over Mexico City's size, nature, and administration to raise new questions about corporatist politics and their dynamics in Mexico as a whole.

Yet let us pause for a moment. Can we really say anything meaningful about Mexico's overall political development trajectories with a focus only on Mexico City and the service and administrative conflicts that have unfolded there? What about Monterrey industrialists, Sonoran agriculturalists, Campeche oil, Chiapas indigenous populations, Jalisco Catholicism, Morelos peasants, to name but a few of the potent national political forces in Mexico's history? Should we not consider their relative impact on the consolidation and weakening of corporatism and one-party rule? Such questions are important for defining the limits of this study as well as for highlighting this book's uniqueness and its possibilities. Clearly, one cannot chart each and every factor or force in Mexico's national political transformations over the past seventy years with a focus solely on forces and conditions in its capital city, let alone with a singular focus on urban development conflicts there. But that is not to say that through a focus on Mexico City and an examination of service and administrative conflicts that we cannot capture some critical aspects of national political development or corporatism that have been ignored in studies of other conflicts, forces, or regions. It is not necessary to prove that other regionally based forces and factors did *not* matter in Mexico's corporatist politics, for example, in order to claim that urban forces and conditions