

Resistance to What? How?: Stalled social movements in Cancun

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This paper explores the utility and futility of the concept of resistance in relationship to urban popular movements in Cancun. While Cancun has become the most popular tourist destination in Mexico, the city is characterized by severe inequalities and neighborhood segregation, the legacy of city planning. Urban settler movements have organized to pressure the city and state governments for land for purchase, public works, and services; yet the power of these movements has been curtailed by government strategies of co-optation, orchestrated enthusiasm, and the bureaucratization of resistance. Many city residents expressed doubts that democratic elections and settler movements could ever successfully ameliorate their condition of poverty. [Mexico/social movements/poverty/segregation]

In the summer of 1999, Mexico was preparing for its first presidential primary election ever. Previously, the seated president named the person who would represent his party in the next election, and since the PRI party had held a virtual monopoly on elected positions for seventy years, the *dedazo* ‘finger tap’ indicated who would be the next president of the republic. In addition, for only the second time in as long, it appeared as though an opposition candidate would quite possibly win the election. The primary campaign season was therefore abuzz, a heady moment when political commentators discussed the “transition” to “true democracy” in Mexico. Local politics also hummed: since politicians had to compete seriously for votes, it seemed as if local activists around the country might have their voices heard.

Cancun has gained a reputation within the country for political activism. The city is one of five Integrally Planned Cities, wholly

designed to host international tourism. As Cancun grew to become Mexico's most popular tourist destination and the most popular destination for U.S. Spring Breakers, the demand for workers fueled its rise as one of the fastest growing cities in all of Latin America. Subsequent large waves of settlers have had pressing needs for housing, public works, and services. Grassroots settler movements in turn emerged to pressure the city and state governments to attend to these needs. I expected, therefore, that activists would use the opening promised by the primary season to call for major changes in electoral politics. What I found, however, were stalled social movements, movements bogged down by what I call the hegemony of enthusiasm and the bureaucratization of resistance. In that season, political action and sentiment oscillated between participation in government-sponsored "citizen participation" and cynical withdrawal from government politics as a whole. This paper explores the utility and futility of the concept of "resistance" through description of political action in Cancun.

Anthropology in the 1990s was swept up in the romance of resistance (cf. Brown 1996). Everyday forms of resistance (Scott 1985; 1990) did not seem to offer the true revolutionary potential that many researchers craved. Laclau and Mouffe (1985) heralded "radical democracy," with each person acting from his or her mul-



Figure 1: The hotel zone

multiple subject positions and joining with others in the "new social movements." Anthropologists working in Latin America expressed true optimism about the transformative potential of social movements, and published multiple edited volumes and ethnographies on social movements (Alvarez et al, 1992; Eckstein 2001; Escobar 1992; Escobar and Alvarez 1992; Fischer and Brown 1996; Stephen 1997; Warren 1998). Inspired by Habermas's (1991[1962]) notion of the public sphere and the new technologies of the Internet, cell phones, and text-messaging, and inspired by the apparent death of the last of the military dictatorships, anthropologists flocked to find new heroes in democratic action.

This paper follows up on Abu-Lughod's observation that resistance points to power. Power is not a simple, easily definable front; rather, networks of power intertwine and overlap. She argues, therefore, that in order to understand the "complex workings of social power" (1990:315), one needs carefully to examine the multiple and varied forms of resistance. Rather than resting with a simple dichotomy of power and resistance, with their implications of moral righteousness, clear definition, and failure/success, I suggest we explore instead the gray areas—the halfway, hybrid forms of power and resistance, such as falterings, stalled actions, co-opted movements, bureaucratized forms of social action, and defeatist withdrawal. The paper explores Cancun's gray area of political action, beginning with an overview of spatial inequalities, followed by an examination of how discontent has been rerouted into a bureaucracy of political patronage, hegemonic enthusiasm, and structured participation. The only independent form of action left is the non-action of cynical withdrawal. The concept of resistance fails to capture this political climate because, with discontent defused and rerouted, it was not clear exactly what should be resisted or how. "Resistance" presupposes something clearly delimited against which to push, but the mechanisms of government power in Mexico are so diffuse that they have encompassed and stalled social movements. In addition, many residents perceived that government and organized movements would never and could never address the ultimate source of their problems, which is poverty. Power was too diffuse and all-encompassing to be confronted.

The three Cancuns

White, silky sand, crystalline blue waters, bright sun, palm trees, large chain hotels with all the comforts of home (times ten), neatly clipped lawns and hedges, clean-swept streets, and a legion of workers in starched white uniforms to attend to your every need... Cancun, dependent on tourist dollars, makes every effort to appear beautiful and comfortable, attractive in every way to its visitors. And spatial organization certainly helps.

Tourists arrive at the airport south of the city. They take air-conditioned buses and shuttle vans up the highway cut through an ecological reserve, and before reaching the city center, the vehicle veers to the right, into the hotel zone. The hotel zone is an eight-kilometer-long, thin, coral peninsula, shaped like the numeral 7, nestled between the Caribbean Sea on the east and a lagoon on

the west. The tourist can (and typically does) comfortably spend the entire week in the hotel zone, a space created as a fantasy-land for the tourist. He or she moves from luxury hotel to beach, to restaurant, to luxury malls with curio shops, to dance club. This face of Cancun is beautiful.

But, as locals will tell you, the hotel zone is only one of the “three Cancuns,” the three sharply segregated zones that make up the city (see also Cardiel Coronel 1989:32–46, Torres and Momsen 2005). An adventurous tourist might enter the second zone, the city center. The city center includes more shops and restaurants for tourists, producer services for tourism enterprises, and middle- and upper-class housing. But a tourist would have to be horribly lost to stumble into the Third Cancun, the vast, expansive zone north of the city center, called the *colonias*. The *colonia* zone, according to locals, is Cancun’s “ugly face.” This Third Cancun is actually home to three-quarters of the city’s residents, the people who work in the hotel zone and city center by day and take an hour-long bus ride home to the *colonias* at night.

This Third Cancun began as a squatter settlement, and continues to be the site of poor housing, with irregularly supplied public works and services. Perhaps a third of the houses are makeshift, either of cement block or a pole structure with tarpapered walls and ceilings. An estimated 40% of the city’s residents live in sub-



Figure 2: Garbage day in the colonias.

standard housing (“Que hay muchas trabas...” 1998). In the *municipio* in 2000, only 58% of private residences had potable water in the home, and only 36% were hooked into the public sewer system (INEGI 2000). The *municipio* government recognized the severity of the problems in its “Cancún Solidaridad” plan of 1990–1993, saying, “The human experience of a person who leaves at dawn a zone without electricity, without water or drainage, traveling on a rocky road to wait for transport to go to a hotel zone where he works in an environment of grand tourism luxury, makes an impression, and cannot lead toward stability” (p. 2, quoted in

Águilar Barajas 1995:28; translation mine): *Colonia* residents, most of whom are migrants both from other parts of the Yucatán peninsula and from other parts of Mexico, say they live in “ugly” neighborhoods. By “ugliness,” many refer to ugliness both visual and political. With the concept of political ugliness, they direct blame outward, attributing the visual disgrace to a disgraceful system of low wages, government neglect, and compromised democracy. The democracy is compromised in that, in their efforts to beautify their neighborhoods, to create a “dignified life” as they call it, activists have often traded their vote for government patronage, as will be discussed below.

The spatial division of the Three Cancuns dates back to the time when the city was just a glint in a banker’s eye. In 1966, the director of the national Bank of Mexico decided to promote mass tourism in Mexico to bring about a positive trade balance and stabilize the peso. In 1969, the Bank of Mexico created Infratur (Fondo Nacional de Infraestructura Turística, which in 1974 became part of the Fondo Nacional de Fomento al Turismo, or FONATUR), an agency that would build the infrastructure for mass tourism. An investigation of climate, population characteristics, beach quality, and land tenure revealed that a tiny coral peninsula in the Yucatán peninsula’s northeast would be an ideal location to build a tourist city. At the time, only seven people occupied the tiny peninsula, and the closest town of any size was 200 kilometers away (Martí 1985). After the mid-nineteenth century Caste War, the eastern half of the Yucatán peninsula had become a vast refugee zone, sparsely inhabited, primarily by Maya subsistence farmers; and the site of some Belizean and American logging and chicle extraction activities, well beyond government reach. But with Bank of Mexico investment of \$26.5 million and a \$21.5 million loan from the Inter-American Development Bank, Infratur began to plan and build the new tourist town of Cancun (Torres Maldonado 1994:223). As such, it was one of Mexico’s five Integrally Planned Cities, cities constructed for the purpose of attracting international tourism (see also Torres Maldonado 2000). Infratur purchased all available land, expropriated some community lands in the name of the public interest and removed resident farmers, and sold parcels to developers (García de Fuentes 1979:22).

Infratur planned a few different sections for the city: the island was for the tourists, the site of hotels, restaurants, entertainment centers, and a golf course, and it would be connected by a bridge to the mainland. The mainland was divided between the city center with its businesses and upper-income residences, an ecological reserve to the south, and the airport just beyond that (Gormsen

1982[1979]; Hiernaux-Nicolas 1999). Initially, the plan included no space for the bulk of the city's workers, the people who would build the hotels, restaurants, shops, and then work in them. As construction moved into high gear, more people came in search of jobs, and a crisis in housing quickly developed. In 1974, the first hotel opened, the first tourists arrived, and the Territory of Quintana Roo became the last state of the republic of Mexico. By that time, 6000 people lived in Cancun. Since land was largely in the hands of Infratur or private owners, the workers were squatters, living in simple pole and cardboard houses on the northern limits of the lands owned and controlled by Infratur. They had no legal right to the land, no electricity, potable water, roads, garbage removal, or other public works and services (Martí 1985).

While many migrants to Cancún are circular migrants, working for short stretches of time and returning back home, more and more families came to settle (see also Dufresne and Locher 1995; Re Cruz 1996a; 1996b; 2003). Finally, in 1975, a city government was created and had to recognize the squatter situation. According to a city planner, "This was the first time in the country's history that a city—before it was even a city—had an urban cancer" (quoted in Martí 1985:52; translation mine). But none of the city officials systematically attended to the growing squatter region until 1982, when the mayor dedicated almost all the municipal surpluses for four years plus state funds to make lands in the *colonias* available for legal purchase and to begin to provide basic services (Martí 1985:72).

Unemployment in Cancun is exceedingly low, at 2.9% in 1996 (INEGI 1997:96); in other words, the *colonia* residents work productively and have enabled the city's economic success. And the success has surpassed all of the bankers' dreams. Cancun is now the most popular tourist destination in Mexico. In 2000, it hosted 3.0 million tourists who brought in \$2.4 billion dollars from abroad (Fondo Nacional de Fomento al Turismo 2005a). In 2004, Cancun attracted 3.4 million tourists, although the number of dollars brought in from abroad was not available at the time of this writing (Fondo Nacional de Fomento al Turismo 2005b). The significance of tourism to Mexico is demonstrated by the fact that, according to the World Travel and Tourism Council (2005), "travel and tourism in Mexico in 2005 is expected to generate USD 1,113.3 billion of economic activity... [and] is expected to account for 14.5% of GDP...and 14.2% of total employment."

Cancun's economic growth is matched by population growth. From those seven inhabitants in 1969, the city had grown to an official count of 419,815 inhabitants in 2000 (INEGI 2000). However,

since so many residents are not counted as part of the population —because, as circular migrants, they prefer to be counted in their hometowns — the estimated actual number of inhabitants in 1999 was 535,000 (“Afecta expansión...” 1999). The annual rate of growth of the city (11%) was the second fastest rate of growth in all of Latin America, second only to the town of Playa del Carmen, which is a spin-off tourist town just to the south (“Crecimiento poblacional...” 1999). At 11% per year, Cancun’s growth rate has slowed from an earlier average rate of 17.3% throughout the 1980s (INEGI 1994:11).

The state housing authority of Inviqroo (Instituto de Vivienda de Quintana Roo) is charged with making lands available for lower-income families to purchase. Inviqroo purchases lands from neighboring *municipios* and *ejido* land grants, divides these lands up into tiny plots of 8x20 meters, lays electric lines and water pipes, and sells the plots for ten-year mortgages at a 10% interest rate. But Inviqroo, for all its frenetic work, cannot keep up with the steady influx of migrants. The housing problem reached a critical level in April 1998 when settler movement activists set fire to some privately owned but uninhabited lands they wanted to occupy (presumably to clear them); due to the heat and drought generated by El Niño, the flames spread into the surrounding forest and over a thousand local residents were evacuated (Sosa and Carrizales 1998). As of August 1999, Inviqroo had provided 34,304 lots, but even then, 7,623 approved applicant families were waiting. Inviqroo was making arrangements for the purchase of 3600 hectares from surrounding *ejidos* (interview with director, Aug. 1999), but even that proved to be insufficient. In the fall of 2000, Inviqroo announced that an additional 1,700 hectares would be needed to meet the projected demand for housing over the next four years (“Advierte Inviqroo...” 2000). Numerous people with approved applications told me they had been waiting for two to four years for their land, and numerous others who had applied as long ago as eight years found the bureaucratic challenges to their applications bewildering and maddening. Those with approved applications must return to the Inviqroo offices every three weeks to see if something is available; if they are not present when their name comes up, the plot is deeded to another family. Further, since there is such a rush on land, its price has skyrocketed, making it impossible for settlers to become homeowners except through Inviqroo. Renting is not a good long-term strategy since rents are higher than the mortgages. An architect wrote a series of articles in a Cancun newspaper decrying the crisis in housing and public services, stating:

In the city of Cancun, only one part was planned, but they did not think about in which place and where would live the people that built it: the employees of the future hotels, the manual labor, which is the most important, the most marginalized. But it is they whom we should help, to teach, to give them what they need, because they give us what they know and what they can, and we don't. Besides forgetting about the majority, they [the planners] also forgot to have sociologists involved in the initial planning, so that they could have a comprehensive understanding of what would happen in the city. The workers do not have a chance to live here. Not taken into account were satellite cities that would develop from this element [the workers], which is the most important. Due to the lack of planning, only more poverty was created in the marginalized zones, to such an extent that they have become uninhabitable. (Carrasco 1999:6; translation mine)

If Cancun is such an economic success, why are public services and lands so difficult to obtain? According to the Inviqroo director, part of the problem is a shortage of funds: income and corporate taxes from the city are siphoned off by the federal government and only a fraction is returned to the city and state governments (interview, Aug. 1999). But many *colonia* residents complained that the main problem is allocation of funds. Somehow, the hotel zone and city center always have smoothly paved roads, manicured vegetation, clean streets, a sure supply of purified water, and garbage removal.

Housing and neighborhood issues are compounded by poverty. In 1997, 7.6% of the employed population in Cancun earned less than US \$4.00 per day (one minimum wage per day). Another 35.1% earned the equivalent of \$4–8 per day, while another 39.1% earned between \$8–20 per day. Only 14.3% received more than \$20 per day (INEGI 1998:93). With these incomes, many found the Inviqroo mortgages too expensive. The mortgages in 1999 were given for a fixed sum of \$26,040 pesos (total, with interest included), or US \$2893. The monthly payment was \$217 pesos/month (US \$24.11). The mortgage includes only the price of the 8x20 meter plot of land itself, and the settlers resort to building their homes on their own (auto-construction). With their low incomes, settlers in the *colonias* have to save for years to buy construction materials. They generally start off with a lean-to made of poles and covered with a tarp or sugar sacks sewn together. This is replaced by a pole structure with tarpaper roof, and finally the

cement house is built over a span of years, one room at a time. The piles of building materials accumulating in yards and half-finished houses everywhere compound the sense of deprivation in those neighborhoods.

Patronage and orchestrated enthusiasm

In the face of government neglect, thousands of residents have become politically active. Cancun residents brag that their city is famous in Mexico for grassroots activism. A number of different grassroots settlers' organizations have arisen to pressure city and state governments to make housing and public services available. They have fought for land to purchase, water, electricity, roads, drainage, sewerage, garbage removal, schools, lands for churches, clinics, parks, and playgrounds for their children. Three grassroots organizations have sprung up to petition these services from the state: the Only Settlers' Front, the Association of Independent Settlers, and the Civic Association of Northern Quintana Roo (see also Dachary and Arnaiz Burne 1990:121–123). The first and the largest settler organization, the Only Settlers' Front, is known by its acronym, the FUC (Frente Único de Colonos). FUC was formed in the mid-1980s by a teacher (see also Dachary and Arnaiz Burne 1990:120–124), a woman who was so successful in organizing the people that she gained a high public profile. In 1999, she was the city's first female mayor. In the early days of the movement, she had encouraged settlers' invasions (*tomas*) of unoccupied lands and encouraged direct confrontations with government agencies. For two years, she led a city-wide campaign of civil disobedience, urging people living on Inviqroo lands not to pay their mortgages. As part of her mayoral campaign, she promised that, once elected, she would arrange for the reduction of Inviqroo mortgages and the cancellation of back interest. At first glance, this might be seen as an example of successful "resistance," but the truth is much more complicated.

As mentioned above, the "ugly face" of Cancun actually has two meanings: first, the humble and often unsightly appearance of workers' neighborhoods due to the double indignity of government neglect and low wages; and second, the ugliness of politics in the city. Often, *colonia* residents would begin talking about what they wanted in their neighborhoods, and would move directly into a discussion of fraud, political corruption, and co-optation. They include the FUC in the discussion of political corruption and betrayal.

Understanding the political process in Mexico requires going beyond a simple discussion of democracy. Within a democratic framework, the PRI (Institutional Revolutionary Party) held a near monopoly on elected offices for three-quarters of a century. Election fraud did occur, but the truth is that most voters did support the PRI. There are multiple reasons for this, including patronage, the hegemony of enthusiasm, and bureaucratization of resistance.

The PRI turned party enthusiasm into an art form, a hegemony of enthusiasm. The PRI traces its origins back to the Mexican Revolution of 1910–20, which has been enshrined in history as a “popular” revolution. Six different armies from different parts of Mexico, representing different sectors of society and different political aims, rose up to topple the dictatorship. In the wake of the fighting, the new government formed the Party of the Mexican Revolution, later called the Institutional Revolutionary Party. The PRI symbol includes the colors red, white, and green (of the national flag) and a circle divided into three parts, reflecting the division of Mexican society into three sectors (army, peasants, and workers). Through its name, symbols, and rhetoric, the PRI proclaims unity and inclusion, a true populism. In essence, to go against the PRI is to go against the idea of unity. The major unions have been tied to the PRI, and to be a member of a union, one claims PRI loyalty. To acquire a government job (even in the schools), you had to be a member of the PRI—or at least, that is what people believed. There were benefits, if you joined in the popular enthusiasm.

The PRI relies upon patronage. Government benefits and services have not been provided systematically and uniformly, but to towns and neighborhoods that demonstrate support for elected officials. At the very least, voters are convinced of this. Patronage is also displayed with orchestrated enthusiasm. Public works are provided ceremoniously, in “Celebrations of Works,” large, festive gatherings where officials give “gifts” to the people. In one celebration I attended, the mayor and governor showed the beneficence of their road-paving project in two *colonia* neighborhoods. For days in advance, FUC and city workers went around the neighborhoods inviting people to attend. At the celebration, large posters displayed the “Works that Count”—public works projects already completed, with photos of the mayor and governor. A dozen bulldozers and dump trucks were set out for show, and children climbed around and played on them. Booming speakers projected a band’s *cumbia* music, while city workers danced with neighborhood residents. Free tacos, popcorn, and soft drinks were liberally passed around, while speeches carried the same tone of jubilant celebration and popular unity. The neighborhood residents in turn “showed” their

support for the PRI by wearing PRI tags and holding banners passed out by government or FUC workers, ensuring that the next round of government gifts would come to their neighborhoods. This system of patronage ensured PRI dominance for decades.



Figure 3: The dance of the bulldozers.

The PRI fosters a spirit of celebration. The grand display of bulldozers is just one example of this sort of event. As part of my earlier fieldwork in central Yucatán, I learned that in the villages, on some random day, word will quickly pass from house to house that there is *libre pasaje* (free bus fare), meaning that buses will arrive and pick up as many people

as can cram themselves in. The people will be taken to some celebratory event, with music, dancing, and food, all financed by the PRI. On one such trip, we were taken to the ruins of Chichén Itzá, and on another trip, we were taken to town to hear the speech of a mayoral candidate. Each time, we did not know where we were being taken, but we were just excited about the outing. For seventy-five years, the PRI had all the funds of the federal government to back its spending on the public, while opposition parties had to raise their funds independently. Many people commented to me that they did not support opposition parties because those parties never “gave” them anything. The bread and circuses strategy worked.

Co-optation

In addition, successful grassroots organizations have often been convinced to affiliate themselves with the PRI party and therefore to be assured of PRI patronage for the people they represent. This is a well-established pattern in Mexico (Eckstein 1977; Halebsky 1995; Hellman 1995; Vélez-Ibañez 1983), to such a degree that Vélez-Ibañez calls co-optation of social movements “part of a general strategy of the public sector, and especially [the PRI] in Mexico to ensure the elimination of upstart groups” (1983:20). In Cancun, the FUC settlers’ movement affiliated itself with the PRI. As a consequence, it receives regular PRI funding, enabling it to

become an established organization with an acre-sized community center and four full-time paid staff members.

The FUC positions itself as a mediator between government and *colonia* residents; in theory a non-governmental organization, but, in practice, an arm of the PRI government. As such, it demonstrates Slater's observation that the border between the state and civil society is often unclear (Slater 1988:388). Because of PRI financing, *colonia* residents can go to the FUC offices and receive: advice on navigating the city's bureaucracy; help filling out applications; letters of reference for jobs; cash payments for widows and the disabled; free classes in English, hairstyling, make-up application, and karate; building materials offered at wholesale costs, and other benefits. The FUC brings in technical advisors—lawyers, electricians, masons, architects, etc.—for those constructing homes. The FUC also invites Inviqroo officials to meet with massive crowds of disgruntled settlers trying to find a place to live.



Figure 4: FUC worker.

Structured participation

One government strategy defuses popular antagonisms by providing a bureaucratic structure for expressing dissent and an alternative structure of neighborhood leadership. One branch of the city government in Cancun is the Head Office of Citizen Participation, which is set up as a channel of communication between the government and the city residents. This office has divided the *colonias* into regions, super-blocks, and 182 neighborhoods (interview with director, 18 August 1999). The Citizen Participation map of the city does not correspond to the “region” structure of FUC. A leader is appointed for each of the neighborhoods, separate from the social movement leaders. Activists complained bitterly that with settlers living in two different “neighborhoods” and having two different “leaders,” confusion and divided loyalties result. Neighborhood residents are expected to take their concerns and complaints to the neighborhood leader who will

express them to Citizen Participation, which then communicates with the appropriate government office.

The Director of the Head Office explained how they try to cultivate ideas about citizen participation. She said there are three different kinds of participation. First, there is “social participation,” a “whatever” (*como sea*) kind of participation—including “marches without a consciousness of organization, without compromise, with people acting out of their own particular interests or dissatisfactions.” She said that a lot of this action is done in large groups, when people do not feel attended to, and in Cancun, most of this is related to housing issues. Second is “community participation,” in which “there is a sense of community, more compromise, a fixed objective, clear methods, where people add their efforts as part of a community effort.” Third is “citizen participation,” in which people have a “sense of themselves as citizens, of their rights, obligations, and responsibilities.” She explained that this is the ideal form of participation, but the hardest to achieve. She said, “This is a broader idea. This is the most difficult kind of participation, because many want their rights but not their obligations.” The office of Citizen Participation exists to channel social discontent into a certain desired kind of social action in which residents form an ordered, disciplined partnership with the government, accepting their own personal obligations as citizens.

The Head Office of Citizen Participation organizes the “Celebrations of Works” (such as the dance of the bulldozers) to “animate” or “enliven” the people. It also organizes “Public Audiences” in different neighborhoods where people can come and meet with Citizen Participation officials and express their concerns. By generating enthusiasm and defusing public animosity, the Head Office of Citizen Participation plays a key role (alongside the FUC) in managing, channeling, and bureaucratizing discontent.

Compromised votes

Certainly, if the FUC did not have the PRI political affiliation, it could never afford to provide its services to the settlers. In return, the FUC ensures PRI popularity in the *colonias*. In September 1999, leading up to the primaries, officials from the PRI campaign held a meeting in the FUC building in which they trained FUC activists as campaign workers. FUC leaders from each section of the *colonias* were expected to work on the PRI campaign. In addition, they were instructed to work on the campaign of one particular candidate, Francisco Labastida Ochoa,

who by all accounts was the “chosen one” within the party. At the training session, one of the leaders stood up, saying that she wanted to “animate” (*animar*) the people, and asked, “We’ve all decided to support Labastida Ochoa, right?”

Hence, the formal co-optation of a social movement can be seen as an extension of the PRI’s strategy of inclusion, enthusiasm, and participation. The PRI funds FUC activities; in turn, FUC leaders ask to see people’s voter registration cards at large FUC meetings. They said that they counted the number of PRI voters in order to put pressure on the PRI to pay attention to the people’s demands; yet, this tactic communicated the necessity of popular unity. Similarly, FUC activities promote obedience to law and order. Many of the speeches in large FUC gatherings included reminders to the people to heed the law: to avoid participation in land invasions, to make their mortgage payments, to regularize the construction of their houses, to pay the Social Security insurance of the builders, etc. A prosecutor who came to talk about citizens’ responsibility in protecting themselves from crime said that the authorities and citizens are like *novios* (boyfriend and girlfriend)—that they needed to look out for one another. In his Cancun T-shirt with an image of dancing Rastafarians, he said, cheerfully, “You are the ones in charge here.” The FUC, hosting speakers who encourage citizens to think of themselves as the girlfriend of the government, has diverged from its origins as a champion of the poor and dispossessed. The PRI took a grassroots social movement and bureaucratized it—a bureaucratization of resistance. The concept of resistance does not easily apply to the FUC because it is not clear what the FUC is resisting (certainly not the PRI or the government). Yet neither is it clear opposition to the FUC that resistance would be in the best interest of poor settlers since, up to this point, no other group has been as effective in securing state attention to and action on behalf of *colonia* residents.

Withdrawal and critique

In the first half of 1999, public support for the FUC fell away significantly. Since the Zapatista rebellion in 1994, an increasing number of voices throughout Mexico were calling for freedom of political dissension, and many in Cancun felt that their votes were compromised by this non-governmental organization that in fact blended into the state. In addition, many felt that the mayor, the founder of FUC, had betrayed the people. Earlier, she had led the mortgage boycott and promised that, once in office, she would seek



Figure 5: Independent activists.

reduction of the Inviqroo mortgages and cancellation of back interest. But after she entered office in February 1999, she told Cancun residents that they had to follow the law and make their payments, and she did not pursue the reduction of mortgages. In the meantime, interest had accumulated on back payments, and many families found themselves unable to get out from under their growing debt. Throughout the summer of 1999, Inviqroo held meetings throughout the *colonias* trying to convince people to make their back payments. Meanwhile, when the mayor published her three-year development plan for the municipio in 1999, it included no mention of housing or land issues whatsoever (Achach Solis 1999). Those left running the FUC administration were tense and defensive: attendance at meetings had declined, and many activists had defected, preferring to work independently.

Many of the newly independent activists continued to work as mediators between people in their neighborhoods and government officials, but insisted on doing so in a nonpartisan fashion. They worked on behalf of neighborhood residents regardless of political affiliation, and asked for the patronage of elected officials from all parties. One group of independent activists with whom I worked arranged for a community welfare center, a police post, a park, and lands for a neighborhood church. In addition, for a minimal fee, they ran a school for neighborhood children in the morning, and in the afternoon, provided secondary school classes for teenagers and adults.

In the midst of all of the government “animation” runs another thread of deep-seated fear and loathing in Cancun. There is a strong distrust of politicians, and fears that they are corrupt and serve the interests only of the wealthy. While I have heard plenty of middle-class Mexicans decry political corruption, the poor have a particular critique that links corruption and wealth. Among the poor in Mexico, economic marginalization compounds a sense of political marginalization. First, people often express a sense of deceit and betrayal. Doña Dora (all names here are pseudonyms), an older domestic worker, complained that politicians are very friendly during campaigns, but not after the elections. She said that during the campaigns, “They go around looking for people to sup-

port them... They look for us even in our humble homes, but now they jump to the other side [to the homes of the wealthy]. They shake hands with others.”

Others expressed a belief that the government is inevitably corrupt because of the corrupting power of money. Don Pancho, a construction worker, said that:

The PRI has been harming us for seventy-five years. It might be good to let someone else harm us for a while. There is democracy, but the politicians just take the money. They need to have moral principles, but they don't. The judges, prosecutors, lawyers—they're all corrupt. The people with fewer resources are good people. They will give you a glass of water. They don't rob people. They will invite you into their home. The rich aren't like that, and you see why. The rich people go to work and don't pay attention to their kids. They abandon them. Without moral guidance, the kids learn to rob and be drug traffickers.

Others characterized themselves as the poor and positioned the politicians as the rich and as insensitive to the needs of the poor. One independent activist, Don Ignacio, said of the people who live in the *colonias*, “We are the poorest of the poor.” He described Cancun as a morally bankrupt economic hierarchy. He explained that a typical worker in the hotel zone earns \$350 pesos/week (\$38 U.S.), whereas downtown, someone might earn \$250 pesos/week (\$28 U.S.), which is “robbery.” He said that the big executives are almost always Americans, all foreigners, and they are the ones that earn money: “They take it all away and leave the crumbs.” Comparing the hotel zone and the *colonias*, he said, “the contrasts: there and here, a lot and nothing.” He explained that the activists ask the hotels to donate things to the *colonias*, but they refuse, saying that they do not have anything to give. He railed that they throw away “so much good food everyday,” while anger and indignation burned in his face.

Don Ignacio offered a strong populist critique, saying, “If I were a politician, they would have killed me already.” He explained that he cares about the poor, so he would never survive as a politician. He gave the example of Luis Donaldo Colosio, predicted to win the 1994 presidential election, who was assassinated ... the victim, many people believe, of others within the PRI who thought him too leftist. Don Ignacio said that Colosio had “plans to clean up the government and to give money to us the poor people, and for that reason he was assassinated.” He argued, “You have to be bad to

be successful.” He said this is unlikely to change, since “politicians have to depend upon others who are already there, who are already corrupt.” He said that the corruption of politicians is inevitable since they need money in order to give out favors; to get money, they need the support of the wealthy, and therefore, the wealthy can buy the assistance of politicians. Another activist, Doña Candelaria, echoed, “If you want to do good for the people, you won’t win. You have to be in the middle.”

Cynicism culminated in withdrawal. A few of the independent activists decided to make a statement through nonparticipation. Although many of them preferred another PRI candidate, Roberto Madrazo, they perceived that since all of the media hype surrounded Labastida, he was in fact the one supported by the powerful ones in the party, and he would win the primary. They reasoned, therefore, that their votes in the primary would not matter. They wanted to send a message to the PRI that it did not enjoy the support it assumed, and so they planned to hold large meetings, encouraging *colonia* residents not to vote.

In a recent book, *The Romance of Democracy*, Matthew Gutmann explores the politics of withdrawal, what he calls “compliant defiance,” in Mexico City. He suggests that the romance of resistance has led anthropologists to focus on those who act out publicly and defiantly. He argues, however, that we need also to pay attention to those who do not “participate” in the ways that we expect or hope. He echoes Judith Adler Hellman who pointed out that, for all of the promises of the new social movements in Mexico, they have not saved the poor from their poverty (2002: XXIV). He says that, “the romance of democracy exists...in the wooing of the populace to believe in utopian promises when their only political future is more of the same” (2002:XXV). One of his Mexican friends commented: “Guess what? Now we have democracy in Mexico, too! We got to choose between a whole bunch of *imbéciles*” (2002:217). The people he worked with in Mexico City bear great similarities to many people I worked with in Cancun: people who were suspicious of the romance of democracy, suspecting that, in their lives, no great changes would come through the electoral process, or even through the organized social movements. In fact, while an opposition party candidate won the presidential election in 2000 (Vicente Fox of the Partido de Acción Nacional), his rightist loyalties have entrenched the neoliberal, free trade policies that privilege business interests over workers.

Resistance?

// **R**esistance” fails to capture the political process in Cancun. The hegemonic enthusiasm and bureaucratization of resistance in Citizen Participation and the FUC settler organization divide and defuse social discontent. Government officials learn information about the *colonias* and secure settlers’ loyalty through patronage and a bureaucracy of government “responsiveness.” Yet neither can the actions of the independent activists easily be labeled “resistance.” They do make changes in their neighborhoods and they protect political choice by remaining resolutely nonpartisan. However, to a certain degree, they are rearranging the proverbial deck chairs on the Titanic. In 1999, neither the PRI nor the PAN promised to challenge the underlying economic structures that continually create poverty in the *colonias*. Yes, the activists fight for land for settlers, but is a 8x20 meter empty, dusty, house plot a measurement of success? The national and international structure of wages and prices underpins poverty in the *colonias*. When the better jobs in the hotel zone pay \$38/week, and when tourists try to haggle for bargain prices and pay 5% tips, after hearing that “that is what you do in Mexico,” it is hard to imagine great changes right around the corner. In Cancun in 2003, the ministerial meetings of the World Trade Organization collapsed. The ministers could not agree on the legality of the agricultural subsidies that the governments of the U.S., many European nations, and Japan provide to their farmers (Ballvé 2003). Agricultural subsidies allow those farmers to sell their goods on the world market at depressed prices, and in turn are one of the major reasons why, each year, thousands of Mexican farmers abandon farming and move to the Cancun *colonias* in search of a job.

In order to beautify their neighborhoods, to ensure access to land and public works and services, settlers need to act. One form of action is through the institutionalized participation of the FUC and Citizen Participation; this requires an enthusiasm and cheer that not everyone feels all of the time. Another form of action is through independent activism that seeks to expose a system of government neglect, corruption, and co-optation. However, taking on the system is tiring work, especially when the romance of democracy and the hegemony of enthusiasm suggest that you should just sit back and enjoy the bread and circuses.

As Abu-Lughod notes, resistance is a “*diagnostic of power*” (1990:314; emphasis in the original). How organized resistance acts reveals the local contours of networks of power. The office of

Citizen Participation and the FUC reveal that power in Cancun does not offer a clean front to resist. There is no clear line between the state and civil society, which, as Slater (1998:388) notes, make confrontation difficult. If one feels animosity toward the city and state governments, are Citizen Participation and the FUC allies or enemies in this process? The answer is not so simple.

Yet it is also important to point out what activism in Cancun does not confront, which is the economic disparities—between the hotel zone and the *colonias*, and between Cancun workers and tourists. The organized activities of the settler movements in this respect are *not* a diagnostic of power, since they do not address the source of the economic inequalities. Jelin notes that this blind spot is characteristic of democracies. She says:

Under authoritarianism, the logic of domination was clear: The lines of the *us* and the *they* could be drawn easily.... Transition to democracy brings confusion and bewilderment.... There is a double discourse: a discourse of participation and a nondiscourse of economic exclusion. (1998:408)

The romance of democracy encourages people to believe that they have equal opportunities to improve their lives. By drawing all attention to parties and elections, democracy obfuscates and detracts people's attention from the things that may be the greater source of their problems, things over which they have relatively little control, such as the international structure of wages and prices. Halebsky notes that urban popular movements in Latin America generally take a "moderate approach" (1995:74) to their problems. They focus on issues of access to land and public works and services, but rarely organize to attack the source of their poverty. They engage with and resist the state, but not their poverty.

Hellman notes that social movements are constrained by and reflect the local political culture. She says, "Because social movements do not arise in a vacuum, they are to some degree products of the political context in which they grow" (1995:179). She was referring specifically to the fact that social movements in Mexico are often co-opted because of the wider political culture of patronage. Yet we have seen that social movements in Cancun reflect the political culture in a variety of ways, in addition to patronage and co-optation. They reveal the blurred line between state and civil society. They reveal PRI strategies of generating state support through orchestrating enthusiasm and popular unity. They reveal

how democracy romances people into focusing on the state and placing their hope in elections rather than confronting the larger forces of oppression. The withdrawal and class critique expressed by many in Cancun cannot be read as passivity, as Gutmann (2002) has noted for Mexico City. Rather, the cynical withdrawal is an expression of a clear-eyed perception that electoral politics and organized social movements may not offer relief from poverty. “Successful” settler activists may end up with a plot of land and a bus route in their neighborhood, but after a nine-hour workday in the luxurious hotel zone, that dusty plot of land and a plate of beans and tortillas are cold comfort. Settler action in Cancun thus reflects the larger national political culture and the global structure of inequalities. Social movements are stalled because what people can resist (the state) offers no clear front and what they want to resist (global inequalities) seems impossible.

Notes

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