

Anger: Past or Future?

By Luis Rubio, President, Centre of Research for Development (CIDAC), Mexico City
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Beyond the aspirants to the Mexican presidency in 2018, perhaps the crucial factor that determines the way electors will act derives from their perceptions of the current reality. According to Pankaj Mishra in his new book *Age of Anger*, those who have not achieved inserting themselves into modernity and take part of its promises –freedom, stability and prosperity- are always easy victims of demagogues, likewise Left and Right. Realities and perceptions are interlaced to the point that they often end up indistinguishable: wins the one who creates a propitious environment for his perspective and vision.

In all corners of the globe, the upset of traditional life could scarcely be greater. Telecommunications has engendered a universe of immediacy; governments, former proprietors of the truth through control of information, today comprise one more mere actor in the discussion of public affairs; job sources have been transformed mercilessly: partly due to competition, partly because of technological change. In this context, there no longer are permanent moorings of stability to which to cling as sources of certainty. The impact, worldwide, has been extraordinary.

This type of disturbance, says Mishra, is not new in history: anger and discontent are factors that are repeated throughout time when high-flying political or technological transitions take place. His argument reminds me of that brutal phrase that Tony Judt makes: “Few in the West are old enough to know just what it means to watch our world collapse.” In the last years we have seen disturbances in the electorate of Poland, England and the U.S. In a few weeks we will see whether something similar happens in France. The response of anger and hatred, as well as self-justification of the violence, are not very different from the messianic and revolutionary movements of Europe in the XIX century or from the Russian anarchists of that era.

Some assert that the growing inequality is another explosive ingredient in this cocktail. Walter Scheidel has just published a massive book in this respect,* arguing that, all through history, only revolutions, epidemics, collapse of States and the mammoth destruction of riches that leads to generalized impoverishment, constitute factors of social equalization, perennially downward, that is, because they ravage the existing wealth. One of his most important contentions is that no country has diminished inequality through structural reforms because these are, at the end of the day, arrangements among those in possession of the power. Ian Morris, an old scholar of these questions, explains why inequality is not a relevant factor in this era: despite inequality, the average industrial worker lives more years, eats better and is richer, freer and better educated than nearly all of the human beings who preceded him.

That is, following Morris, to the degree that the perceptions and expectations of the population are positive –that their life level will improve- the voters do not entertain any initiative to modify the status quo in a radical manner. The day before the U.S. and Brexit elections, there were many possible scenarios at play: in both cases, the result could have gone either way, because both were very close. In this regard, while the political fact of who wins and who loses changes the panorama, the explanations about why it occurred tend to be excessive: more justificatory than analytical.

My point here is that there are factors that influence the spirit of the voter and that all politicians (with the exception of the President of Mexico at this moment...) ply exploitation in an attempt to sway the will of the electorate in a given direction, creating an environment of certainty. No one has been more skillful and virtuoso than AMLO in these leagues.

The changes undergone by Mexico in recently times have also been enormous. Part of the country has been transformed in impacting fashion and part has remained shackled to the past. Those in the first group surely have a positive perspective of the future, while those persisting in ancestral forms of life and production probably have not modified their manner of perceiving the world in many decades. The most volatile electorate is the third group: that of those who have seen the world change without getting a grip and reliable sources of certainty. Part of that derives from the uncontrollable process of change, part from the absence of responses and solutions to daily problems –from poor infrastructure, passing through corruption- but taken together, this generates conditions that are naturally well-disposed to ire, anger and malaise. The lack of certainty with respect to NAFTA clearly does not help.

None of these elements is novel in Mexican politics. What is new is the absence of presidential leadership. Without party distinction, all of the recent presidents attempted to channel to the process of change to make sense to and provide direction for the population. Today the only one attempting that leadership is the main opposition candidate. Thus, it is not difficult to account for his position in the polls.

*The Great Leveler: Violence and the History of Inequality from the Stone Age to the Twenty-First Century

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