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**Disasters as Critical Junctures?
Managua, Nicaragua 1972 and Mexico City 1985***

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Applying an adapted “critical juncture” framework to disasters, this paper compares two major urban earthquakes in Latin America: the December 23, 1972, event in Managua, Nicaragua, and the September 19 and 20, 1985, events in Mexico and particularly Mexico City. The purpose of using a critical juncture approach to the two disasters is to identify and assess event legacies, especially political legacies and how they contributed to regime change. This paper comes to the conclusion that while the Nicaragua disaster did indeed constitute a critical juncture for that nation, setting the political system off on an entirely new trajectory, somewhat unexpectedly the Mexico event did not. In retrospect, the Mexico earthquake of 1985 has to be seen as more of a marker event within a much longer and more complex national critical juncture that opened

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in 1968 and closed in 1988. Narrowing the focus to just Mexico City, however, the disaster was a critical juncture.

The terms critical juncture, watershed, crossroad, and turning point are often used synonymously. For scholarly use, however, “critical juncture” as a concept has a much more restricted definition, now indissolubly linked with the influential Collier and Collier (1991) study of labor movements and regime change in Latin America. For Collier and Collier (1991, p. 29), a critical juncture is “a period of significant change, which typically occurs in distinct ways in different countries (or in other units of analysis) and which is hypothesized to produce distinct legacies.”

For their part, disasters are often described as critical junctures, watersheds, crossroads, or turning points, at least implying that these events—or more precisely their aftermaths—changed entire courses of history in various countries. Dore (1986, pp. 322–323), for example, tied the 1972 Managua earthquake disaster and the ensuing behavior of the Somoza regime to the eventual rise and victory of the revolutionary Sandinistas, arguing that “[t]he earthquake marked the beginning of the end for Somoza.” Close (1988, p. 28) placed even more emphasis on the earthquake by noting that the Somoza regime was stable and secure—until December 23, 1972:

The machinery of state, that is the National Guard and the Nationalist Liberal party, was Somoza’s to do with as he pleased. The bourgeois and middle sector opposition was weak and divided, and the radical and guerrilla opposition had proved no match for the Guard. Furthermore, Nicaragua was prospering within the newly formed Central American Common Market, so there appeared to be enough wealth to satisfy both the Somoza clan and the rest of Nicaragua’s wealthy. All this changed on 23 December 1972 when a massive earthquake rocked Managua, killing at least 10,000, injuring 20,000 more, and leaving three-quarters of the city’s 400,000 people homeless. Tacho’s [Somoza’s] behavior in the aftermath of the quake was the first step toward destruction of the dynasty.

Consider also this rather typical (if somewhat romantic) post-impact description of the aftermath of the 1985 Mexico earthquake, which was widely heralded as a socioeconomic and political turning point (it also conflates Mexico City and Mexico, a common problem¹):

During the next several days, as the last aftershocks of the 1985 earthquake faded, the nation's streets trembled with the marching feet of surviving seamstresses, who led protest demonstrations of thousands. No political party or guerrilla band organized them. They organized themselves, forming a labor union and leading every subsequent march of the urban poor. Within a year, the largest anti-government demonstrations since the 1968 "Olympics massacre" were taking place in Mexico City. Thus ended Mexico's much vaunted "political stability." The 1985 earthquake and its aftermath brought down the curtain on an entire era and set the stage for a qualitatively new drama. (Cockcroft 1990, pp. 39–40)

Our central research question thus became: Do these two earthquakes (Nicaragua 1972 and Mexico 1985) really qualify—in the restricted sense of Collier and Collier—as national critical junctures, especially for the political system? It was true, after all, that in less than a decade following their disasters, each country underwent a profound regime change. Nicaragua went from a personalistic, caudillo-like, authoritarian political system in 1972 to a quasi-Marxist, quasi democracy by 1982. Mexico went from a one-party, corporatist, and repressive authoritarian political system in 1985 to a liberalizing multiparty system openly committed to democratic protections and processes. Simply put, both Nicaragua and Mexico were "different countries" ten years after their disasters, and the underlying question kept coming up: What was the role of each country's disaster in the national transformation?

Applying the critical juncture framework comparatively to the two events, their aftermaths, and regime change then brought up a second question: Is there a broader utility for critical juncture analysis in disaster research? That is, can and should the framework be further adapted and applied to other major disasters? Would such an effort be fruitful beyond merely better description? This question became even more intriguing when a critical juncture analysis led to some unexpected conclusions in one of the cases.

Case selection is always an issue in this type of paper, particularly when we chose to limit analysis to only two disaster events. Despite obvious differences between Nicaragua and Mexico, however, both had the same "disaster agent" (earthquakes) which occurred in the same geopolitical region (Latin America), fell within a relatively narrow time period (thirteen years, from 1972 to 1985), and affected authoritarian (nondemocratic) political systems. In addition, the time perspective

now available on each disaster (thirty years and seventeen years respectively) allowed more confident judgements about event legacies.

The Critical Juncture Framework

Based on the definition above, Collier and Collier (1991, p. 30) argued that the critical juncture concept contains three essential components: (1) “the claim that a significant change occurred within each case,” which was easily met for both post-1972 Nicaragua and post-1985 Mexico with their respective regime changes; (2) “the claim that this change took place in distinct ways in different cases,” met with equal ease in the two cases here (one was extremely violent, one was relatively peaceful); and (3) “the explanatory hypothesis about its consequences,” which is where the substance of the case analyses and the resulting variance proved so interesting.

Collier and Collier further specified (pp. 30–31) five essential components or building blocks necessary for the framework: (1) the antecedent conditions or baseline against which the critical juncture and its legacies can be assessed; (2) the particular “cleavage” (or crisis) that emerges out of the antecedent conditions and in turn triggers the critical juncture; (3) the all-important legacies of the critical juncture; (4) alternative explanations involving “constant causes”; and (5) the inevitable and eventual end of the critical juncture and its legacies.

In constructing their critical juncture framework, Collier and Collier duly acknowledged the scholarship of many others but especially the underlying work of Lipset and Rokkan (1967) and David (1985). The latter was especially important for the argument that crucial transition periods set up “path dependent” societal trajectories for nations in which—wonderfully phrased—once the trajectory is altered, “one damn thing follows another.” Nonetheless, following that causal chain for over a decade or more is admittedly a challenge.

Despite its analytic advantages and undeniable intuitive appeal, the critical juncture framework is also a bit unruly, principally because it is so domain or context dependent. That is, the event under study requires adapting some of the framework’s components to the event, which builds in a certain interaction effect. Moreover, the framework must address rival explanations to an event being a critical juncture. To their credit, Collier and Collier (p. 35) explicitly discuss this under the rubric of “constant cause,” which “operates year after year, with the result that one may observe relative continuity in the outcome produced by this cause.”

Hypothesizing a disaster as a crisis precipitating and then forming

part of a critical juncture, however, actually confers a special advantage when dealing with the problem of constant causes. Despite the fact that a disaster obviously entails cascades of new and interrelated variables, a disaster by its nature—its sudden intervention—clarifies and reveals, while often exacerbating antecedent relationships, tensions, and cleavages. In effect, a disaster is like a biopsy—a slicing into a country's very structure that reveals its political, economic, and social health. Indeed, Dynes (1988) once argued along this line that a disaster cuts through the "morass" of tradition and ideology and allows more direct observation of basic social and political processes and consequences.

The key to applying the critical juncture framework to any case or set of cases is, of course, the identification of legacies. With our avowedly political focus, we understand a legacy to be a subsequent trend or logical post-critical juncture sequence of occurrences that eventuates in a regime change (a shift in dominant political values with corresponding institutional, process, and participation alterations). Analytically, legacies endure and can be traced back to their points of origin, which brings this paper back to the two disasters.

Nicaragua

Managua 1972

Central America is subject to powerful tectonic forces, but few earthquakes in recorded history are as vividly remembered as the December 23, 1972, Managua event. Despite its relatively moderate magnitude (6.4 on the Richter scale), it was incredibly destructive for three primary reasons: (1) the epicenter was literally under the old center of Managua; (2) Nicaragua had no effective building codes, even in the capital, and this left apartments, businesses, office buildings, and the nation's infrastructure highly vulnerable; and (3) Managua utterly dominated the country economically, socially, and politically. As noted at the outset, the human losses were startling (the actual numbers will never be known), but the city—the nation's capital—was virtually destroyed (if not by the earthquake, then by the ensuing fires). The estimated GDP loss was 40 percent.

It is impossible to find a scholarly or personal treatment of Nicaragua that does not assign great significance to the 1972 disaster or, more precisely, its aftermath. Diederich (1989) dedicated an entire chapter to the earthquake in his history (still the most definitive) of the Somoza family. Published only a year after his fall and shortly before

his assassination in exile, Anastasio Somoza's authorized (and rather self-serving) political autobiography, *Nicaragua Betrayed*, actually opens with the 1972 earthquake, the narrative flowing from that event.

Within the literature on Central American politics, the consensus is that the Somoza regime's (the Kissinger Commission actually termed it a "kleptocracy") gross mishandling of the disaster fundamentally realigned political forces in Nicaragua. The mishandling of the disaster—all phases, all dimensions—then contributed directly to the downfall of the entire regime. Walker (2000, p. 70) offers this description:

The last of the Somozas was a self-centered, tyrannical man who lacked the political skills of his father and his older brother. His behavior following the 1972 earthquake alienated one of the important pillars of the Somoza system, the domestic elite. He saw the influx of international aid and the spending programs created in the demolition and reconstruction of Managua as an opportunity to enrich himself and his cronies. Accordingly, he bullied his way into key sectors of the economy (demolition, cement, concrete, construction, among others) and had the government award his enterprises lucrative contracts. He also allowed the National Guard to misappropriate and sell food and other material relief supplies. In so doing, he lost the support of most civilian elites.

The most respected historian of Central America, Woodward (1999, p. 223) explains that the disaster

led to the reestablishment of a tight military rule, which Somoza justified on the ground of the need for unity during the economic and social reconstruction of the country. As in Honduras [referring to 1974's Hurricane Fifi], national disaster was used as an excuse for a return to militarist rule.

Somoza's tightening of the political controls, however, actually unleashed renewed opposition. More specifically, the Somoza regime's handling of the emergency alienated the very influential Catholic Church of Nicaragua, which did not have warm relations with the regime before the event but was then appalled at the post-impact corruption, as Anderson (1988, pp. 179–180) recounts in detail:

Relations between church and state were further embittered by the behavior of the government following the great earthquake

of December 1972. ... Some 10,000 Managuans were killed and almost all the businesses were wiped out. Amid the rubble, only Somoza's Intercontinental Hotel remained standing. The behavior of the Somozas and the *Guardia* [the army] in the months that followed was disgraceful. Large amounts of foreign aid, much of it from the United States, came in, only to disappear into the hoards of the *Guardia* officers and the civilian politicians. ... The result was tragic: The center of Managua remained a vast ruin, never rebuilt under the Somozas. Indeed, only in the time of the Sandinistas has even the rubble been removed. Somoza preferred to leave the center that way because he and his cronies had bought up large parcels of land on the perimeter of the city. There they located new housing and shops after the quake, making a vast fortune from the disaster.

Subsequently, recovery and reconstruction then alienated the middle sectors (who suffered much of the damage when so many businesses were destroyed but saw little of the post-impact help) and even reached into the traditional business elite, who saw themselves largely excluded from the hundreds of millions of donor dollars flowing into Nicaragua—and then flowing right back out to numbered overseas accounts. In fact, the Sandinistas could not have scripted it better: Disaffection was spreading group by group, and even the traditional elite was becoming convinced that “the dynasty was dispensable” (Close 1999, p. 16). As neutrals or previous Somoza supporters moved into opposition, the Sandinistas—the only viable alternative regime—benefited.

An extraordinarily vivid legacy indicator of the 1972 disaster in Managua is how fresh it remains in the minds of today's Nicaraguans. In the aftermath of Hurricane Mitch in 1998, the Nicaragua branch of the *Universidad Centroamericana* fielded a public opinion survey of Managua. The questions focused on a variety of disaster impacts and issues, but the team's discussion of one issue—transparency—stood out:

Another sensitive issue has been the question of honesty and openness in the management of international aid. ... For the international community, the issue has a historically transcendental aspect. Nicaragua set an indelibly negative precedent in ... 1972, when huge quantities of aid ... were diverted or misused. ... The concern [for transparency] is equally strong inside Nicaragua. (IDESO 1998, p. 41)

Interestingly, and again in large measure because of the memories of 1972, the Alemán government in Nicaragua assigned most of the responsibility for the 1998 distribution of Hurricane Mitch relief to the Catholic Church and nongovernmental organizations.

In short, the 1972 Managua earthquake disaster was clearly *the* crisis that precipitated and gave rise to the critical juncture: the delegitimation of the government and the prying open of social and political space that disproportionately benefited the Sandinistas and led eventually to civil war and the end of the Somoza regime seven years later, in 1979.

Legacies of the Managua 1972 disaster and its aftermath persist to this day, including the emigration of thousands of Nicaraguans of all classes to the United States. Increased pluralism, social mobility, political opportunity, and in the end, democracy are the most important and enduring. In fact, the 1972 disaster still abruptly divides Nicaraguan history and collective memory.²

To recall, a requirement for applying the critical juncture framework entails asking the following: Would these legacies have come about without the 1972 earthquake? Thus, were they, by themselves, historical inevitabilities or natural developments? The answer for Nicaragua is “probably not.” While it could be argued that internal modernizing forces and persistent struggles to address the social issues of poverty and income inequality might eventually have opened political space in Nicaragua, there is little doubt that the gap was first pried open with the 1972 disaster. Nothing was ever the same afterwards, and indeed “one damn thing” did follow another. That is, without the earthquake, (1) Church, middle class, and eventually elite disaffection would not have increased dramatically and then coalesced; (2) the Sandinistas would not have resuscitated; (3) civil war would have been averted; (4) the Somoza regime would not have collapsed totally and been replaced by the Sandinistas; (5) U.S. sanctions and the *contra* war would not have occurred; and (6) democracy would not have started to take hold in Nicaragua. In sum, the 1972 Managua earthquake was indeed a critical juncture for Nicaragua, even in the restricted scholarly sense.

Mexico 1985

A Vastly More Complex Case

To be fair, at the time of the 1972 disaster, Nicaragua had a total population slightly over two million. In contrast, Mexico had a 1985 population of approximately 90 million, nearly 20 million of whom

lived in the greater Mexico City area. That is, at the time of its disaster, Mexico City *alone* had a population nearly ten times that of Nicaragua in 1972. These population differences, combined with Mexico's enormous social and historical complexity, require that a critical juncture analysis of the Mexico 1985 case be more extensive.

The Event and Early Response. There were actually two Mexico 1985 earthquakes, separated by a day and a half. The epicenters were located in the offshore Michoacán Gap some 400 kilometers to the southwest of the capital. The first earthquake, on September 19, registered 8.1 on the Richter scale. The second (on September 20) was technically an aftershock, registering 7.3 on the Richter scale. Both were felt over most of Mexico. In the capital, however, their long wave motion interacted devastatingly with the water-saturated subsoil of the central zones to bring down hospitals, hotels, warehouses, factories, and apartment buildings. Every city zone exhibited some damage, but the downtown area and the oldest, poorest sections of the city suffered most.

To this day we do not have an agreed-upon casualty figure from the twin earthquakes, not even for the dead. The Government of Mexico death count remains "approximately" 7,000. Off the record, however, even most Mexican officials go along with a minimum 12,000 to 15,000 people killed. Journalists and the popular culture of Mexico City still talk of 20,000 dead.³

For the most part, the inhabitants of Mexico City responded to the disaster constructively. Indeed, their volunteerism was immensely helpful in the rescue and relief efforts, providing refuge, food, water, and clothing to the disaster victims. Many observers took notice of this collective effort (for early observations, see Schroeder 1985 and Robinson et al. 1986), calling it the first spontaneous popular mobilization in recent Mexican history. In the words of Monsiváis (1987, p. 12):

[W]hat was most alive in Mexico City was the presence of a new social actor whose more appropriate name is "civil society." A previous nonexistent or postponed society takes form all at once: brigades of volunteers, children carrying stones in a disciplined manner, medical school students, the group of alternative technology from the National University that sets up latrines, gang members that leave the ghettos to help, thousands of teen-agers making use of their rights as citizens for the first time, urban popular organizations, nurses, religious groups, the señoras that make meals and boil the water, the engineers that form brigades to evaluate damages. ...

More analytically, Monsiváis (1987 pp. 12–13) then offered:

Thanks to this great common, existential experience an unknown (and unexpected) force unveiled the enormous rewards that collective effort can bring. ... Although in the strictest sense only the movement of the homeless emerged at first, among hundreds of thousands of others it strengthened the will to act, to contemplate the small and immense consequences of individual action within collective action. The experience of the earthquake gave the term “civil society” an unexpected credibility.

Five years after the event, Smith (1990, p. 149)—in the important “Mexico Since 1946” chapter of the *Cambridge History of Latin America*—described the disaster and the response this way:

The damage was greatest in the old downtown area, where tumbling buildings took the lives of at least 7,000 persons and maybe as many as 20,000. Well over 100,000 were injured or homeless, as the world looked on in horror and dismay. The citizens of Mexico City responded with generosity and courage, giving instant aid and shelter to the damnificados in a spontaneous outpouring which prompted some observers to take note of the emergence of “civil society.”

Smith (1990, p. 150) then continued:

There was political fallout too. Amid the rubble were signs of corruption in that some of the buildings had failed to comply with construction codes. Many Mexicans felt that the government had responded with too little too late, that [President] de la Madrid had not been able to rise to the occasion. There was concern about the excessive centralization in Mexico City, and a wide-spread clamor for having the regent [similar to, but more powerful than, a mayor] of the Federal District chosen by election rather than presidential appointment. Grass-roots mobilization continued and helped bring down a cabinet minister.

Writing slightly later, Annis (1991, p. 100) noted:

In the aftermath ..., a coalition of urban organizations successfully forced the Mexican government and the World Bank to

alter housing relief plans, accelerate the process of reconstruction, and reverse several fundamental urban policies. The coalition achieved this by uniting scores of neighborhood organizations. Hundreds of thousands of earthquake victims joined other urban poor to wrest concessions through deft media manipulation and political bartering.

Levy and Bruhn (2001, p. 70) provided even more detail on the post-earthquake grassroots mobilization and its policy and political effects:

The ineffective emergency response system angered citizens; worse still, the slow and corrupt distribution of international and state aid left victims unprotected. In contrast to government incompetence, Mexican civil society rapidly organized to carry out actions—until then the exclusive domain of public agencies—such as organizing search teams, shelters, and food for the homeless. Later, many of these groups became advocates for victims, demanding state services and loans to rebuild lost homes.

Interestingly, the Mexican press was initially silent on these larger issues, primarily because the government controlled the media. The first treatments of the event dealt with numbers—that is, the physical impacts—followed by the usual personal interest stories on heroes and the altruistic community. However, opposition periodicals—especially *La Jornada* and *Proceso*—soon began pointing out government ineptitude in the rescue and recovery phases, and articles critical of the political system in general also began to appear. Cristina Pacheco, Elena Poniatowska, and Carlos Monsiváis wrote journalistic accounts and newspaper articles covering the disaster's aftermath. Later, Pacheco (1986) and Poniatowska (1988) compiled disaster testimonials, and Monsiváis (1987) wrote the work noted above on social movements and societal organization in which the earthquakes figured prominently.

Scholarly literature also recognized the long-term impacts and consequences of “Mexico City 1985.” Most comprehensive works on post-revolutionary Mexico include at least a sidebar treatment of the disaster, almost always noting the political and social consequences and the rise of popular organizations.⁴ Camp (2000, p. 614), with his contribution to the *Oxford History of Mexico*, is a good example:

As the administration struggled to cope with the political fallout from its economic austerity strategy, Mexico City

experienced a natural disaster that would itself produce consequences of considerable political magnitude when a major earthquake struck on September 19, 1985. From the public's point of view the earthquake revealed the president [Miguel de la Madrid] as distant and overly cautious. ... In an extraordinary display of community self-help and collaboration, the residents themselves led the efforts to rescue victims, and the Catholic Church was instrumental in organizing relief aid. The displaced residents, along with those who lost their employment, finding themselves unsatisfied with the government's efforts to cope with their problems, formed grassroots organizations, leading to a flowering of civic action and other types of interest groups. ... These groups anticipated those that would later become part of a larger grassroots movement of human rights and civic action groups in the late 1980s and 1990s.

For his part, Castañeda (1993, p. 224) argued that "the earthquake unleashed a combination of anger, organizational drive, and desire to act independently of the overpowering Mexican state that shook Mexico City almost as much as the earthquake." Tangeman (1995, pp. 63–65) concluded that the popular response to the disaster "helped revive Mexico's suppressed student movement in the winter of 1986–87," and he linked both factors to the presidential elections of 1988 and the subsequent pressures for "democratization" in Mexico. Gil (1992) made similar points in his interviews with Mexican opposition leaders, where he explicitly framed the discussion in pre-earthquake and post-earthquake terms. Smith (1991), Camp (1993, 1999, 2000), and Cothran (1994) have echoed the theme.

For most observers, therefore, the social response to the earthquakes went beyond the solidarity, altruism, and self-help actions characteristic of most post-disaster situations. Indeed, the reaction to the 1985 disaster in Mexico was seldom framed within the established discourse on human nature and disaster. Instead, the social reaction was placed within a state-civil society opposition framework and was therefore seen as a milestone of citizen participation, which is a fair assessment at one level. The problem with such an assessment, which gives great importance to the earthquake, is that many popular organizations were challenging the PRI-state system *before* the 1985 earthquake, and thus a "civil society" was already in the making.⁵ Seen in fuller historical perspective, the 1985 disaster simply *accelerated* the process by revealing the surprisingly limited capabilities of the PRI-state, thereby

opening political space (or making people aware of pre-existing space), which then created additional political opportunities.

The critical juncture analytic question then becomes finding the roots of this oppositional mentality in Mexico, and La Botz (1995, p. 71) offered an important perspective on the 1985 disaster that took us back to 1982 and, indeed, all the way back to 1968:

The idea of a “civil society” in struggle against a controlling state clearly resonated in Mexico, where by the 1980s, there was a kind of ideological and intellectual vacuum. Many Mexicans had distrusted their government since the 1968 massacre. After the crisis of 1982, when Mexico was unable to pay to its debt to the New York banks, the PRI’s nationalist economic development program was also discredited.

Tlatelolco: The Early Antecedent in the Critical Juncture Framework

In Mexico, the student movements that culminated in the 1968 Tlatelolco Massacre shook the Mexican political system to its very foundations, but at the time few realized that the hairline fractures of 1968 would develop into cracks that would eventually compromise the structural integrity of the whole edifice. As Smith (1991, p. 359) put it:

There had been a long and venerable tradition of student activism in Mexico, with disturbances customarily put down either by limited force (as in Guerrero, Morelia and Sonora) or by the dismissal of the rector (as at UNAM in 1966). In such instances authorities and students recognized and accepted the rules of the game, a set of boundaries and codes that neither side would transgress. This time would be different.

The sequence of events leading to the massacre can be traced to a series of student strikes led by pro-Castroites in the mid-1960s and to the general ambiance of political discontent during the Díaz Ordaz administration. Several university campuses exploded with strikes and violence as local university issues merged with national political unrest. A series of massive strikes at the National University in the spring of 1966 resulted in the aforementioned resignation of the rector. As Meyer and Sherman (1995, p. 665) noted: “Federal troops were dispatched to restore order on university campuses in Michoacán and Sonora. A

major showdown was about to ensue, and the students picked their time very carefully. Mexico was planning its greatest extravaganza [the Olympics] since the centennial celebrations of 1910.”

President Díaz Ordaz was enormously proud that Mexico was the first developing country to host the games. The world’s attention would be trained on Mexico, and he felt that this would be Mexico’s opportunity to be considered an up-and-comer nation, a candidate for First World status (an eerie echo of 1994, NAFTA, Salinas—but then Chiapas). As Riding (1985, p. 59) stated, however: “The political mood of students, intellectuals and much of the middle classes . . . had soured under Díaz Ordaz’s unsubtle version of authoritarianism, and the huge expenditure on preparations for the Olympics became a further irritant.” In truth, it was an ill-fitting modern mask for external consumption that Díaz Ordaz was trying to paint over Mexico’s internal social contradictions and horrendous income distribution profile.

The first clashes between students and the police started in early July, and the protestors were repeatedly warned that further demonstrations would not be tolerated. The Olympics were approaching, and the rallies and demonstrations were an embarrassment to the government and especially to President Díaz Ordaz. In his State of the Union Address (September 1, 1968), Ordaz (1970) expressed real irritation:

We have caused Mexico to appear in the eyes of the world as a country in which the most reprehensible events may take place; for the unfair and almost forgotten image of the Mexican as a violent, irascible gunman to be revived; and for slander to be mixed with painful truth in the same news reports.

(Díaz Ordaz would then prove, however, just how violent and irascible a Mexican *president* could be).

The Tlatelolco rally was not large compared to the protests and demonstrations that would be organized in the 1980s and 1990s in Mexico City’s *zócalo*, but it was not small either. On October 2, 1968, thousands gathered in the Plaza. The demonstration was peaceful. The speeches were emotional but not noteworthy. Riding (1985, p. 60) summarized what happened next:

At around 5:30 P.M. there were 10,000 people in the plaza, many of them women and children sitting on the ground. Two helicopters circled above, but the crowd was accustomed to such surveillance. Even the speeches sounded familiar. Then sud-

denly one helicopter flew low over the crowd and dropped a flare. Immediately, hundreds of soldiers hidden among the Aztec ruins of the square opened fire with automatic weapons, while hundreds of secret police agents drew pistols and began making arrests. For thirty minutes, there was total confusion. Students who fled into the adjacent Church of San Francisco were chased and beaten and some were murdered. Journalists were allowed to escape, but then banned from reentering the area when the shooting stopped. That night, army vehicles carried away the bodies, while firetrucks washed away the blood.

Several hundred people were killed. The government conceded 32. The 1968 Olympic Games were held without major incident, and Mexico's image abroad was saved. Less immediately visible but more important in the long-term, the moral legitimacy of the entire PRI-state system was undermined. In particular the regime lost the support of most of Mexico's established and upcoming intelligentsia. Krauze (1997, p. 733) noted the historical impact of 1968 on Mexican politics and society while focusing on the motivations and *consequences* of people's actions (interestingly similar to the post-disaster observations):

The Student Movement of 1968 opened a crack in the Mexican political system where it was least expected: among its greatest beneficiaries, the sons of the middle class. On their own account they rediscovered that "man does not live by bread alone." Their protest was not in behalf of revolution, it was for the broader cause of political freedom. As had been the case with the doctors, the government did not know how to handle middle-class dissidence except through the same violent methods (loaded threats or loaded guns) that had given them effective results with the workers and the peasants. Here, their action had the opposite effect.

1970s: The Long Simmer

After Tlatelolco the regime fell back on its "classic" semi-authoritarian characteristics as opposition simmered and the regime waged a relatively quiet dirty war. The 1970 presidential campaign was typical despite the tense political atmosphere generated by the Tlatelolco incident. Luis Echeverría had been the Secretary of *Gobernación* (the Mexico equivalent of Interior) under Díaz Ordaz, so many Mexicans

held him largely responsible for quashing the student movements. Echeverría, knowing many held him at least partly responsible for 1968, tried to appease and co-opt the students and middle sectors. Echeverría, however, had to deal with serious economic woes and the demands of a business class fearful of Mexico moving too far to the left. Caught between the demands of the Mexican business class and the social needs of the Mexican people, Echeverría vacillated ideologically, appearing weak if not schizophrenic. Levy and Székely (1987, p. 156) described Mexico's situation in the mid-1970s:

In 1976, economic problems and the confrontation between the regime and the private sector reached a climax. By the end of the year President Echeverría, now a vanquished reformer, had little alternative but to comply with the rules of the international economic system that Mexico had repeatedly accepted in various formal conventions. These rules, for example, discourage excessive reliance on foreign credit to finance a large share of domestic investments and imports. ... Certain major similarities would characterize the 1982 and subsequent economic crises and the bitter pills Mexico would have to swallow in order to gain foreign help in combating them.

Swallowing the pills was difficult, but when José López Portillo took office as president in 1976, he believed that he was initiating a *sexenio* that would launch Mexico into the First World, based largely on newly discovered oil reserves. He was dead wrong, but it would take a few years to show.

Cleavage One: The 1982 Economic Debacle

The discovery of vast petroleum reserves in Tabasco and Chiapas sustained Mexico economically through the late 1970s. The discoveries brought international prestige and attention to Mexico. As Meyer and Sherman (1995, p. 681) pointed out, however: "Only the most naïve considered petroleum a panacea for Mexico's sundry social and economic problems, but few realized the dangers that petro-dependency portended for the future." Nonetheless, foreign lending institutions were more than willing to provide funds to oil-rich Mexico for government construction, public works, social welfare projects, and government subsidies of consumer goods. This massive deficit spending was predicated on the expectation of ever-increasing oil production and price rises.

Contrary to practically everyone's expectations, however, oil prices fell in the early 1980s (a production glut). The global petroleum price crunch pushed Mexico off its perch and down the economic slide, and in 1982 the López Portillo administration handed over to incoming President Miguel de la Madrid the worst Mexican economic crisis in 50 years: high inflation, capital flight, a recently devalued peso, and loss of investor confidence.

Every Latin American country suffered in the so-called Lost Decade of the 1980s, but it was especially hard on Mexico, which eventually took an embarrassing regional last place in budgetary allocations for health and education, once a point of pride for Mexicans. This massive reduction aggravated poor socioeconomic conditions for millions and heightened social conflict (although demonstrations were kept contained by the government so as not to attract the attention of journalists or casual observers). Politically, the economic crisis contributed to PRI electoral retreats at state and local levels, internal party conflicts and divisions, and increased support for the opposition. In addition, popular organizing and protest started to express itself in a manner increasingly independent of the traditional structures of corporative state control—and about which the financially strapped PRI-state could now do little. It was in this context that the 1985 disaster occurred.

Cleavage Two: The 1985 Disaster

The “classic” Mexican PRI-state was clearly in trouble on many fronts when the 1985 disaster struck, but it was still perceived as monolithic. With the disaster, however, the time lag between public perceptions of system strength and the reality of its weakness was dramatically shortened, especially in Mexico City. The result was the much-heralded explosion of popular organizing, often called the rebirth of “civil society.”

Missed by many, however, was that in addition to classically emergent organizations from the disaster (see Anderson 1969; Dynes 1970; Quarantelli 1970; Perry and Lindell 1990; Oliver-Smith 1994; and Stallings 1995), a “social infrastructure” of sectors within civil society existed *before* the earthquakes that was able to take advantage of the revealed weakness of the PRI-state to expand into the response phase (and then into recovery and reconstruction). In fact, the situation was even more complex because several emergent organizations subsequently institutionalized themselves and addressed broader issues, transcending the disaster. Hellman (1994, p. 136; see also Foweraker and Craig 1990) profiled one of the most important:

[T]he Asamblea de Barrios is a popular urban movement that grew out of the mobilization following the earthquakes that struck Mexico City in 1985. Initially formed by those left homeless in the disaster, the Asamblea outlived the emergency, expanded its membership, and began to organize poor urban people around the demand for affordable housing for slum dwellers in the center city and the extension of urban services—potable water, sewer lines, electricity, schools, clinics, and bus lines—to people living on the periphery of the Federal District.

Carrilo (1990, p. 213) focused on another emergent organization that institutionalized itself, the 19th of September Garment Workers Union:

During the first six months of the union's existence, the garment workers' movement evolved apace with the sudden political opening that followed the earthquakes. With well-publicized but temporary cooperation from state authorities, it quickly consolidated as an independent union and pressured individual factory owners to pay indemnity to over 2,000 members who were earthquake victims.

With these observations in mind, a rather different picture emerges from that generally accepted about the 1985 disaster. Admittedly, there can be little doubt that dozens, perhaps hundreds, of emergent organizations developed in the aftermath of the event. Such organizations arose out of immediate unmet needs, especially in search and rescue, first aid and medical transport, and the provision of food, water, and shelter to victims. Despite being so ephemeral (or perhaps because of it), in Mexico City these emergent organizations were and are still widely celebrated in journalistic accounts, testimonial literature, histories, and in collective memory of the disaster—perhaps too celebrated.

For Mexico City 1985, however, the focus needs to be refined to distinguish among *four* social movement categories because it was the different *types* that made the Mexico City 1985 disaster so political, not just the numbers of movement organizations. The first and better-known category is the “classic emergent” movement typical of disasters and described above, when people recognized an unmet need and came together to fill that need until such time as “normalcy” returned.

The second category comprised that set of organizations that did indeed originate out of the disaster but then institutionalized themselves for sustained life. Some of these remained earthquake-centered, but

others eventually took on additional issues or causes to remain viable. That is, they became permanent or at least sustained actors in the post-earthquake political environment in Mexico City.

The third and fourth categories are much less known but very important.⁶ The third category was a set of organizations that preexisted in the central zones of the Mexico City, often focused on housing problems and tenant-landlord disputes and therefore often in ongoing conflict with the PRI-state. It was only a short jump for this type of movement organization to “transform” and become earthquake-related.

The fourth category comprised those organizations, also preexisting, that moved into the most damaged zones and neighborhoods of Mexico City from outside. They organized affected populations but brought with them established orientations, techniques, and structures. That is, they “appropriated” the earthquake and integrated earthquake concerns into their ongoing agendas. For our purposes here, we call these “parachuting” organizations—but this is not meant derogatorily.⁷

With a few exceptions, such as the garment workers union noted above, the PRI-state resisted these various movement organizations, seeing so-called “spontaneous” collective action as more of a threat than as an ally and fearing the coalescence of a more powerful and better-organized opposition. In fact, during the reconstruction phase of the disaster, the government tried (unsuccessfully) to proscribe independent activity until government reconstruction projects got underway.

In a more general treatment, Foweraker (1990, p. 17) argued that the degree of social mobilization after the 1985 earthquakes came as a serious surprise to the PRI-state, which found itself ill-prepared both organizationally and conceptually:

One dramatic illustration was given by the earthquake in Mexico City where the PRI government was obliged to abandon its own renewal projects in the face of popular mobilization and organization and recognize alternative projects proposed by popular movements. . . . This was a convincing demonstration of popular potential for policy initiatives that countered the clientelistic assumptions of the government, and this successful challenge carried over into the formation of neighborhood committees, the election of representatives to the assembly, the dissemination of the demand for an authentically elective government of the Federal District, and clear electoral triumph for the opposition in July 1988.

An Even More Direct Legacy: The Democratization of Municipal Government

As Foweraker highlighted, probably the most concrete legacy of the 1985 disaster for Mexico City was the democratization of municipal government. Traditionally, politics in Mexico City were extremely exclusionary. Mexico City residents did not even elect their own mayor. Instead, the president awarded a very loyal *priista* with the powerful position of *regente* of the city. More poignantly, the *Distrito Federal* did not have elected representation in the Mexican Congress. The 1985 disaster changed that, as Tavera-Fenollosa (1999, p. 108; see also Tavera-Fenollosa 1998) explained:

Supported by churches and left-wing organizations and parties, earthquake victims came together in one of the most—if not *the* most—successful urban popular movements of recent decades: the Movimiento de Damnificados, or Earthquake Victims' Movement. The movement demanded, and got, expropriated land on which to construct low-cost housing for the earthquake victims and then set about the rebuilding process. But beyond such tangible achievements, the Earthquake Victims' Movement had important political consequences. Framed as an icon of civic competence and democracy, the movement undermined the “repressive discourse” with which the government justified its exclusion of citizens from local government, challenged the legitimacy of the political status quo in the Federal District (DF), and opened the door to the democratization of government and citizenry in Mexico City.

Within a few months of the disaster, the *regente* of Mexico City, Ramón Aguirre, announced a new willingness to publicly discuss citizen participation in local government, largely as a result of the widespread social reaction to the disaster:

The way in which Mexico City's society has responded to very critical circumstances indicates that the foundations of an extraordinary civic maturity have been laid down. Therefore, the conditions are ripe for the analysis, dialogue, and presentation of alternatives regarding the transcendental issue of citizenship participation in the government of the capital. (*Cámara de Diputados* 1985, p. 22)

After much debate and the floating of various proposals over several years, residents of Mexico City finally voted for their own representation in the July 1997 midterm elections. Tavera-Fenollosa (1999, p. 126) summed up the larger lessons of how social movements can affect both issue definition and salience:

The case of the Movimiento de Damnificados and the democratization of Mexico City's government indicates that social movements can contribute to political change, not only by creating and placing new issues on the agenda but also by recasting old ones, especially politically sensitive issues that governments have successfully kept off the agenda and which other actors, especially political parties, have failed to bring into the legislative arena. By recasting prevailing definitions of a situation—and thus changing perceptions of the costs and benefits (and the injustices) of the status quo—social movements can force public and legislative debate on issues that would otherwise remain undiscussed and probably unaddressed.

The 1997 changes in Mexico City, however, put us ahead of the disaster story. As Foweraker noted above, the most important national elections after the 1985 disaster were held in 1988.

The Last Cleavage: The 1988 National Elections

In September 1984, the first rumors about the creation of a democratic trend within the ruling party (which would later split the PRI) had begun to circulate. Led by Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, Porfirio Muñoz Ledo (a participant in the 1968 students movement and former President of the PRI, among other public positions) and Rodolfo Guevara Niebla, the Democratic Current (*Corriente Democrática*), demanded the democratization of the party's candidate selection procedures and the reformulation of the government's economic policies. The 1985 disaster then provided fertile ground for the movement, Baer (1991, p. 182) noting that Cárdenas

found mass constituencies among millions of the Mexico City poor. He mobilized the discontent of the urban poor, who first stirred during the 1985 Mexico City earthquake. The quake triggered the spontaneous growth of popular organization outside the grasp of the PRI. Cárdenas ... offered hope to poor

neighborhoods, merchant organizations, tenants' rights movements, Mexico City's quarter of a million students, and dissident unions in the garment industry.

Although few earthquake-related organizations stated explicitly political agendas (their problems were essentially socioeconomic), they were generally anti-PRI or antigovernment, so the vast majority sympathized with the Cárdenista cause and supported the opposition leftist PRD in the 1988 presidential elections, post-revolutionary Mexico's most hotly contested. The question remains open in Mexico as to who garnered the most votes in 1988: the PRD's Cárdenas or the PRI's Carlos Salinas de Gortari. In the end, Salinas was declared the winner.

Despite clear evidence of fraud, Cárdenas chose not to send his supporters into the streets, which might have unleashed uncontrollable violence. For its part, the PRI leadership promised electoral reform, and this time they promised that it would be serious (even the PRI apparently understood that 1988 was their Last Hurrah of electoral alchemy).

In the 1991 midterm elections, it appeared that everything had returned to normal. The PRI regained its strength, primarily because the PRD leftist coalition could not muster the same support it had in 1988. Despite the apparent return to "normalcy," political liberalization and reform continued apace. In 1993 an electoral reform law helped to make the electoral process more fair and transparent, and the Federal Electoral Institute (Spanish acronym, IFE) was reconstituted, releasing it from the fetters of government control and empowering it to oversee and monitor the voting process. The 1994 presidential election appeared both fair and clean, despite being preceded by several traumatic events, especially the Chiapas uprising and then the assassinations of PRI presidential candidate Luis Donaldo Colosio and then PRI Secretary General Mario Ruiz Massieu.

The 1997 midterm elections continued the liberalizing trend. One result was that first ever duly-elected mayor (*regente*) of Mexico City—the PRD's Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas. The second result was an opposition majority in the Chamber of Deputies (Mexico's lower house), again for the first time. Nonetheless, the most significant development has been the most recent. The 2000 presidential elections resulted in the PRI's first defeat ever, when Vicente Fox of the center-right, conservative PAN party won not only the vote but also the election.

In Retrospect: The 1968–1988 Critical Juncture

Leading scholars on Mexico have uniformly embraced the notion that Mexico is in transition. The political system can no longer be described as “classic,” and the PRI-state is no longer *the* system. Roett (1993, p. 1) made an interesting comparison with the 1970s:

The conventional wisdom about Mexico in the 1970s was relatively simple. First, the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) was a stagnant and immobilized bureaucratic machine that was determined to cling to power at any cost. Second, economic liberalization was highly unlikely given the power of the public- and private-sector interests that benefited from the traditional model. Third, political change was almost impossible because of the first two components of the conventional wisdom.

As Roett noted, none of those themes holds now. Political and economic liberalization, electoral reforms and the widening arena of political participation, NAFTA, globalization, and the end of the Mexican Revolution are the new themes (see, for example, Aguilar Camín and Meyer 1993; Aitken et al. 1996; Camp 1999, 2000; Centeno 1994; Cornelius 1996; Cornelius, Gentleman, and Smith 1989; Gawronski 2002; Handelman 1997; Levy and Bruhn 2001; Meyer 1992; Middlebrook 1995; Morris 1995; Otero 1996; Purcell and Rubio 1998; Randall 1996; Roett 1995; Schulz and Willams 1995; and Teichman 1995, 1996, 1997).

The root of all these changes, indeed the root of the entire transition of Mexico from an authoritarian to at least a quasi-democratic system, was the 1968–1988 critical juncture. To reprise, moral delegitimation of the PRI-state came first with the 1968 massacre, but this was later complemented by demonstrated incompetence and weakness with the 1982 economic debacle, the 1985 earthquake disaster, and then the 1988 election. It was this twenty-year period that launched Mexico on an entirely new trajectory, which puts the 1985 disaster in full perspective.

Conclusion

We opened this paper with two questions: (1) Does either the Managua, Nicaragua, earthquake of 1972 or the Mexico City earthquake of 1985 qualify—in the restricted scholarly sense of Collier and Collier—as critical junctures?; and (2) What is the broader utility of the

critical juncture framework, and what can be learned by adapting and using it outside of its original employment?

Taking the second question first, we found the critical juncture framework to be a powerful heuristic device outside of its original use on labor movements and regime change. By elucidating relationships and interactions between events and identifying consequences through legacies, the framework required that occurrences such as disasters, no matter how apparently traumatic, be placed and analyzed within their contexts, thus counteracting the tendency to emphasize the importance of sensational (or sensationalized) events. This de-emotionalizing is particularly important for understanding disasters, where the media and the general public tend to take them historically and analytically out of context.

By compelling close and consistent attention to legacies especially, the critical juncture framework leads almost automatically to more historically informed and detached analysis. For example, in the case of the two disasters, it allowed a more subtle differentiation between the causal and the revelatory, which brings us back to the first question.

Were the two disasters critical junctures? The answer turns out to be a clear “Yes” for Nicaragua but a somewhat surprising “Qualified No” for Mexico.

In Nicaragua, because of the response-recovery-reconstruction dynamics it generated, and because these dynamics transcended the disaster and initiated a fundamental realignment of political forces in Nicaragua, the 1972 disaster set the country on a different historical trajectory. After the earthquake, the Somoza clique progressively alienated precisely those groups (the Church, the middle sectors, the economic elite) whose support—or at least whose neutrality—was essential for regime maintenance. This then translated into an ever-increasing dependence on violence and repression, a slide toward and then into full-scale civil war, and ultimately revolutionary regime change. Therefore, in Nicaragua after the 1972 earthquake, “one damn thing did indeed follow another.”

For Mexico, where everything is much more complicated, our conclusion is that the 1985 earthquakes *by themselves* did not constitute a national-level critical juncture. Rather, the 1985 Mexico disaster was a “cleavage” in the larger context of political change and transformation for the entire country that began in 1968 and ended in 1988. Indeed, one of the great advantages of applying the critical juncture framework to Mexico was that it clarified the sequencing of the PRI-state’s loss of legitimacy. As noted above, the system lost moral legitimacy in 1968 and began to be challenged on a value basis, which had been previously unthinkable. The regime maintained itself, however, by cooptation and

selective repression, but with the 1982 economic debacle, the regime lost the necessary resources to continue cooptation on the previous scale. The 1985 disaster then revealed—to all—just how few resources the PRI-state system actually commanded and how much political space actually existed, evidenced by the explosion of the (hopefully now better understood) post-disaster social movement organizations, which proved impossible to repress. The confluence of all these factors made the PRI politically vulnerable in 1988, which the critical juncture framework's required concentration on legacies enabled us to identify as the closing cleavage that generated the current era of Mexican political liberalization and transition to democracy.

Notes

1. Historically, Mexico has been highly centralized politically, economically, and even culturally. Thus it could be argued that a true critical juncture for Mexico City should translate into a national-level critical juncture, but many scholars also emphasize the country's vast regional diversities—in fact arguing that there are “Many Mexicos” (see Simpson 1946; Needler 1995; Bonfil Battalla 1996; Kaplan 1997; Zermeño 1997).

2. The 1972 disaster still comes up regularly in conversation, and Managuans still give directions using geographic reference points that no longer exist—that is, buildings that were destroyed in the earthquake—since the capital has few street names and addresses.

3. See Albala-Bertrand (1993, pp. 135–136) and Dynes, Quarantelli, and Wenger (1990, pp. 30–31) about the government's handling of the figures.

4. Not every scholar has characterized the 1985 event as constituting such a social and political turning point. For example, Ward (1990, p. 171) noted that the PRI-state system correctly perceived several earthquake emergent groups as “breaking the rules” of the political game; the state then used the earthquake reconstruction housing program to play off various organizations against each other and regain control of the situation (pp. 194–196; see also Butler and Bustamante 1991 and Davis 1994). Nonetheless, the vast preponderance of the literature highlights the disaster-related popular organizations and social movements as the most significant long-term outcome of the disaster. Indeed those groups were important, but taking it one step further, we argue that the most significant legacy was the political consequence of those groups: political liberalization.

5. In the early 1980s, three independent (not linked to the PRI-state apparatus) national coordinating bodies of social movement organizations already existed: the National “Plan of Ayala” Coordinating Committee (CNPA), a coordinating body of peasant organizations created in 1979; the National Coordinating Committee of Education Workers (CNTE), created that same year; and the National Coordinating Body of the Urban Popular Movement, which was founded in 1981. These popular organizations primarily addressed poverty issues. Prior to the emergence of these *coordinadoras*, there was little resistance to decreasing living standards in Mexico City. With the creation of the *coordinadoras*, however, it became easier to organize large-scale protests and challenge the regime (see Tavera-Fenollosa 1999).

6. Shefner (1999) finds an interestingly similar pattern in the aftermath of the 1992 sewer explosion in Guadalajara.

7. We borrowed this term from a somewhat different context. Families invading property as squatters, who would then organize themselves into a cooperative to buy the land, were known as “*paracaidistas*” (parachutists) because they seemed to drop out of the air from nowhere. The disaster made this strategy, which had become increasingly common in the early-1980s, even more viable.

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