El Barzón: Performing Resistance in Contemporary Mexico

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Se me reventó el Barzón
y sigue la yunta andando

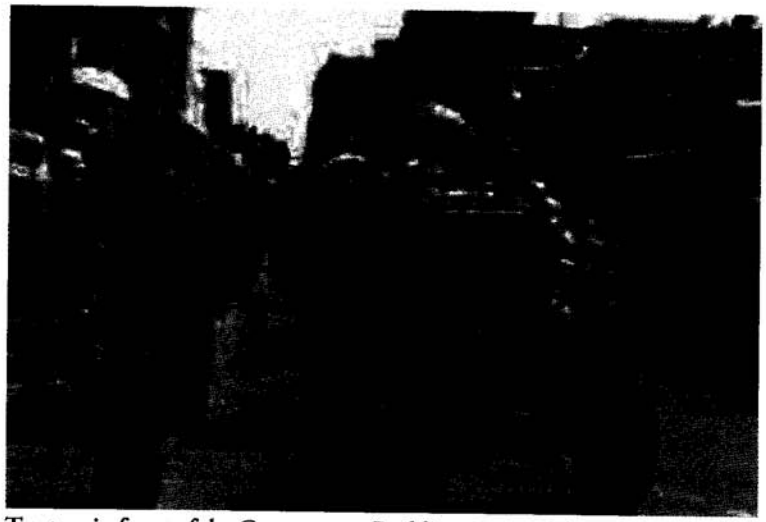
The yoke's hitch broke
and still the oxteam pulls
— Revolutionary *corrido*

In January of 1994 Mexican television viewers divided their attention between the Zapatista revolt in Chiapas and the scandals of President Salinas's last days in office. However, as is frequently the case, selective reporting by the media served to mask other important developments in the political arena. New and important grassroots organizations were springing up surreptitiously, receiving little or no media attention since the Zapatista revolt held the main focus of the international and national media.

For more than a year, as early as February of 1993, a group of small landholders had started to organize in the Pacific rim states of Colima and Jalisco. Although rivers of ink were devoted to the southeastern unrest, the many tractors, plows, and other agricultural equipment strategically parked in front of banks and around main squares did not win many headlines. At first glance, their grievances were purely economic because the financial situation of small rural farmers was extremely difficult. Despite the "brilliant" IMF-approved macroeconomic reforms of the de la Madrid and Salinas administrations, the microeconomic impact of their palliative programs against poverty received mixed reviews by analysts and public opinion (Kouyoumdjian 90; Krauze 428). At the same time, the old practices of power transference and communication with the masses that had helped assure the Revolutionary Institutional Party (the PRI) its long life were alienating the traditionally loyal rural population (Krauze 402).

Moreover, due to the lack of support from PRI regional organizations in charge of rural issues, a group of *pequeños propietarios* (small

landholders) and some *ejidatarios* (communal landholders) decided to make their dissention public and move their machinery into the main squares of Sayula and Autlán in southern Jalisco. Eventually this emerging movement would be called *El Barzón* and would include not only economically-threatened peasants and middle-class famers, but would also come to represent urban middle-class credit-card holders, microindustrial entrepreneurs, taxi drivers, and artisans threatened by skyrocketing interest rates and other decisions of those in control of the re-privatized banking system (Gil Olmos). One of the most harmful policies being criticized was the reformulation of loan contracts, frequently being done without the consent of the signing parties. Compound interest rates and stiffer clauses for seizure of property in instances of loan defaulting were also being put into place (Rudiño 5). According to the *barzonistas*, banks and the local judges were in collusion with the government to deprive small farmers of their property (Adorno Jiménez).



Tractors in front of the Government Building in Guadalajara, Jalisco September, 1993

A harsh economic situation resulted in the rapid growth of a number of social organizations. What is so unique about the *barzonistas* in Mexico is their rapid evolution from a regional organization with limited membership to a full-blown social movement with 500,000 members by 1995, only two years after its inception (Williams, *Planting* 8). How was this evolution possible? What practices of public

performance permitted this *petite bourgeois* movement to grow so rapidly? How is public space, historically modelled on official government structures, used by this group? Are these revolutionary or oppositional practices? How can we relate these performative practices to other cultural activity currently taking place in Mexico? What frames of reference can be used to explain the hybrid nature of *barzonista* cultural appropriations? These are the questions which structure my inquiry.

Given the multilayered nature of cultural artifacts and performance practices used by *barzonistas* it is impossible to stick to one set of tools for analysis. In order to deal with the heterogeneity of the performative acts of this group this essay is divided into three main parts: 1) a brief introduction to the political and economic situation in Mexico and other countries that lead to the emergence of contemporary social movements conscious of the importance of performative acts to express their disagreement with national authorities; 2) a description of the character of the *barzonistas* as a group and the development of their strategies of protest; 3) an analysis of the artifacts and representations put in place by the group. The last section specifically targets the manipulation of music, especially the corrido "El Barzón" as a re-reading of traditional music and lyrics, and public performance re-enacting rural exodus by occupying plazas, obstructing access to banks, burning credit cards, and taunting lawyers to denounce and expose corruption. Along with brief descriptions of these phenomena I will propose an interpretation of the functions and effects of these practices.

Mexico's desire to be considered a modern state marks the political life of a nation with more dreams of progress than visible signs of technological and economic development. Spotted with periods of violent resistance, the mirage of modernity has become an obsessive narrative for control and stabilization. With a death toll of one million, the Mexican Revolution promised the common man and woman participation in the enormous enterprise of modernity. To that effect, post-revolutionary governments represented themselves (with some differences) as the only legitimate modernizing force. Ironically, when the nation south of the Río Grande was finally about to step into the realm of modernity, reality turned sour and from the open door of free trade came the violence of revolution. Only this time the term revolution was neither being used by the power-holding hierarchy nor by

the institutionalized revolution embodied in the ideology of the ruling party, the PRI.

On New Year's Eve of 1994, President Salinas's six-year plan for economic integration through the North American FreeTrade Agreement (NAFTA) suddenly seemed to lose its promise when the Zapatista Liberation Army occupied four small towns in the Chiapas mountains (Le Bot 25). With an amazing capacity to use and manipulate the mass media, Zapatista leaders shattered several social myths that served traditionally as PRI banners for legitimacy. Two myths omnipresent in the media for a time were used as slogans or as common places in electoral rhetoric: the myth of social peace, assured since the last phases of the armed struggle of the Revolution (1910-1921); and an axiomatic identification of the PRI with the word revolution which assured the continuity necessary for progress and modernization.

Symbolically, the Zapatista uprising increasingly affected international opinion even after the initial shock of the first round of violent photos and articles in the Mexican and United States press. The Zapatista communications stategy exposed the deep contradictions of a disintegrating political system. Very conscious of the role of modern media in the public sphere, as the moderator of ideological and economic messages, Marcos and the rest of the Zapatista subcommanders provided material for a capitalist myth-making industry. Although risking commodification and eventually pasteurization by the constant repetition of messages, the Zapatistas established close and direct contact with a network of diverse media that reproduced their *communiqués* by radio, television, and the internet. Books, interviews, e-mail groups, web pages, T-shirts, flyers, and posters are some of the forms that the response to the Zapatistas's clever manipulation of the media has taken (see Trejo Delarbre).

On the national economic front the situation was worsening rapidly. When the nationalized banking system was finally turned over to the private sector, governmental controls over local creditors were deliberately kept loose to allow a fast recuperation of investment for the new banking system. Credit contracts included aggressive conditions that in combination with a deteriorating exchange rate and the increasing volume of imported food products caused a very difficult situation for most farmers (Fraser). Banks upheld their tougher policies and loans defaulted by the thousands. A conflict between debtors and banks appeared inevitable. Under these conditions, there was no room for rational discussion of enacting new banking provisions even though

many questioned the legality of bankers's actions when loans were overdue. Strategies for denunciation and public performance were rapidly put in place to publicize *barzonista* objections. By these means they opposed the microeconomic conditions imposed by the PRI regime (Williams, *Planting* 36).

There had already been a similar incident of this type of protest in 1992 in Japan. Rice producers there went on a hunger strike and marched with their tractors to Tokyo to oppose the signing of the Uruguay round of the General Agreement on Trade and Tarriffs (GATT), which threatened their heavily protected internal market (Thomson 4). Strasbourg and Paris were witness to public protests by farmers and farming interests when massive gatherings clashed with the police in December of 1992. They were also in disagreement with the agricultural policies proposed by the United States upon the signing of the GATT (Riding 11; Waxman 9). This widespread protest demonstrates global unrest among rural populations losing political and economic leverage (Orr 3). This is happening not only in Western, already developed nations. It is also becoming a reality in rapidly-industrializing countries of Latin America like Mexico, Brazil and Chile.

Despite their diminishing economic power, traditional rural societies tend to devise strategies and find new ways of expressing their discontent. *Barzonismo* is a prime example and desperate claim for social and political clout in a postmodern society. The performances of the rural producers in France, Mexico and Japan share in the major international events of 1989—the Tiannamen Square protests and the destruction of the Berlin wall. In this sense, taking to the streets and marching with tractors through the main arteries of the city are theatrical acts that intend to upstage official authority and demand the right to compose the script of the economic and political future of their societies (Schechner, *The Future of Ritual* 58).

Due to the pragmatic sense of space and ritual that *barzonistas* use in their demonstrations, the concept of performance seems a suitable approach to analyze the movement. The working definition for our analysis is as follows: public performance is a group demonstration for another group (or groups) that takes place in a public space in which desires and cultural and political opinions are expressed through original actions and the manipulations of artifacts. A public performance reflects the interaction of such groups with the authorities, often competing for control of the script, or the stage where power is

enacted (Villegas 315; Schechner, *Performance Theory* 30; Schechner, *The Future of Ritual* 45-93). It is important to stress that to study public performance one must pay attention not only to the external or theatrical acts staged in the streets but also to the internal evolution of the group, the development of said group's ideas, and it's attitudes towards those in power.

As Jesús Silva-Herzog states in his popular paperback *Breve historia de la Revolución Mexicana*, the central demand of the 1910 Revolution was for land redistribution (13). The mobilization of scattered groups of peasants to participate in the armed confrontation was possible in large part due to popular aspirations to recover the share of communal lands lost to the *hacendados* and the liberal governments of the nineteenth century in the states of Central, Western, and Southern Mexico. Recall that Zapata's motto was "For Land and Liberty" (Tierra y Libertad), and his main motivation to rebel against Madero's government was the delay in enforcing land reforms (*Plan de Ayala* in Keen 322; Córdova 435). After the struggles for power among the different revolutionary factions (1913-1921), and the promulgation of the Constitution in 1917, popular demands for redistribution land for farming were unwillingly attended to.With the arrival of Lázaro Cárdenas to the presidency in 1934, the pressures of the *caudillista* elite of previous governments needed to be eased so that stability would reach not only the newly-formed ruling class but at the same time respond to urgent popular demands. The solution was the corporativist structure of a central party that would amalgamate the interests of all classes. This structure was to assure participation in decisionmaking by more or less democratic acts of consultation but mostly by popular participation. (Córdova, "Estado en México" 548).

Popular participation was understood as the mobilization of large masses of peasants and workers at public meetings, where they were to show simply by their presence their support for candidates, economic policies, and overall allegiance to the government. These meetings became rituals for legitimization and public space became the space for nation building. These rituals allowed for the legitimization of the system to the point of identifying the party and its representatives as the inheritors of revolutionary ideals. As stated by García-Canclini:

> The territory of the square or the museum becomes ceremonial by virtue of containing the symbols of identity, objects and souvenirs of the best heroes and battles, something that no longer exists but

> is preserved because it alludes to origins and essence. It is there that the model of identity —the *authentic* version—is conserved. (133)

Similar to this appropriation of public space and national identity, corporatist organization promoted by the office of Lázaro Cárdenas (1934-1940) through the Partido de la Revolución Mexicana (the PRM, former name of the PRI) served to define the identity of all popular organizations. The peasants, the workers, the military and the popular sectors played the roles that any single Mexican was allowed to play (Hamilton 136-171). The entrepreneurial sector was left out or free to constitute other political conglomerates and negotiate its participation in direct dialogue with the government (Lajous, et. al. 332). In theory, the social pact between classes and the government was to make everyone feel represented and entitled to participate in political decisionmaking.

To sustain its highly centralized structure, PRI governments needed a widely extended network of alliances. With a very wide range of contacts, the party and its organizations were in charge of conducting a permanent consultation among the bases. The PRI delegates were active in popular enclaves, *colonias* and *barrios* in every municipality and in every district of every state. The practice of organizing any kind of political group had to be sanctioned by the party and the state (Alonso and Rodríguez 352-58). Groups that would not fit in this structure or tried to duplicate the functions of the PRI sectors were considered independent or reactionary with the consequent need to negotiate their presence in the maze of official organizations (González Casanova 302; Halperín-Donghi 186).

The aformentioned process of negotiation often included political pressures to conform with other state structures, bribing leaders, coercion by economic or legal means or, in extreme cases, direct repression by the police or the military. This is the story of many rural and urban grassroots organizations that yielded to one or several of the tactics mentioned above. One of the most salient cases is the Coalición Obrero Campesino Estudiantil del Istmo (COCEI), a peasant organization based in the Southern states of Oaxaca and Guerrero, brutally repressed over the course of the last twenty years (Flores Lúa et. al.; León and Marván 40). Another painful example of course is that of the student organizations violently surpressed during the Tlatelolco incident in 1968 (see Poniatowska 163-273).

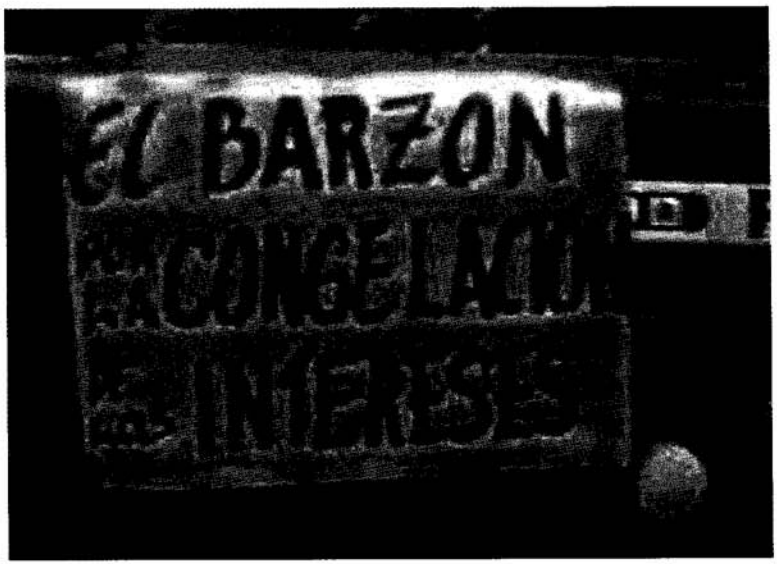
Given this panorama of organizational practices it is important to notice how the governmental apparatus has gradually evolved in order to deal with groups with diversified interests (Fuentes 34-45). This process has lead to a separation into other parties. The most recent example is the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD). Leaders like Porfirio Muñoz Ledo and Cuahutémoc Cárdenas represent a class of disappointed members of the regime who opted for breaking their commitment to the PRI in lieu of keeping what they call the "party discipline," an important virtue for party members (Krauze 414). At the same time, this separation involved a cloning of organizational practices from governmental structures. How then does El Barzón come to play a role in the reformulation of the rules of the organizational game?

One of the central issues in every social movement is the process of attracting new members. In the case of the *barzonista* movement, the simple act of consumption in its broadest sense and/or the use of financial services of any kind makes one eligible for membership in the movement. When banks threaten to repossess private property, families can ask for the protection and help from El Barzón's legal services. A *barzonista* is born when an individual pays dues or contributes some sort of good or service and signs a membership form. Cash is not necessary for *barzonista* membership.

> Paradoxically, the lack of cash in many debtor households has enhanced the Barzón movement's ability to conduct collective actions. For example, when an individual facing the imminent loss of home or business goes to a local Barzón coordinator in the community for help, he or she will likely be recruited as a member of the organization. Once helped by the organization, the recruit—still with no cash to pay the lawyers or the two dozen or so other Barzón members who blocked the police and authorities attempting to repossess the recruit's property—is urged to participate in actions to protect others' property. If the recruit has something the organization needs, he or she is also encouraged to pay in kind for the protection offered by the Barzón. In this way, local Barzón chapters often acquire small but necessary items such as typewriters and office suplies, as well as expensive items such as office space or a truck or taxi that can be used to transport movement members to protests. (Williams, *Planting* 28)

In this way, not only families and individuals but also entire groups of

consumers can simply be enrolled by a contribution of some sort to the different Barzón chapters. Affiliation with the movement can also be expressed legally through the signature of one of the many bill proposals sent by the different regional *barzonista* organizations to the legislative bodies of the government. Another way to enter the organization is by filing a counter-grievance to bank lawsuits or property seizures. *Barzonistas* have accused the banks of usury and although the Mexican Constitution penalizes this crime, financiers were seeking tougher penalties. All of these efforts were supported by the National Bar of Lawyers (Flores, Laura, et. al.).



El Barzón wants interest rates frozen

Since 1995 *barzonista* activism has extended to thirty-one out of thirty-two Mexican states and the networks established are not limited to any one class, gender or political affiliation. There are not only individuals but non-governmental and governmental organizations as members. Furthermore, some mayors of small towns have also joined in support of the members of their communities (Muñoz).

Affiliation with the movement does not preclude participation in other political or social organizations. Being a member of El Barzón does not seem to conflict with other ideological, political, or gender positions (Lovera 34). The resulting hierarchy produces a very hori-

zontal organization where groups of *barzonistas* are staging strategies at both local and national level without a rigidly-centralized structure of control. These loose patterns are a contrast to the rigid corporatist associations traditionally imposed by the union and party politics of the government. Also important to note is the non-violent character of the movement and the law-abiding rhetoric and strategies for struggle (Pérez; Muñoz). El Barzón should be considered not a threat to the state at large but a counterbalance to its stiffening control of social organizations. It is probably thanks to its legalistic character and its large constituency that the movement has not felt the full repressive force of which the Mexican government has shown itself capable.

This movement's strategies for public performance have fostered an explosive membership growth. To complement our working definition it is important to present the concept of performance in the public space as defined by Diana Taylor:

> Performance is not antithetical to 'reality' nor does it suggest artificiality. More in keeping with its etymological origins, performance suggests a *carrying through*, actualizing, making something happen. (276)

The *barzonista* movement is presenting a strong message that questions and reformulates a number of practices prescribed by the government for the deployment of cultural and class identity. As in the case of the "Madres de Plaza de Mayo" analyzed by Taylor, *barzonista* strategies are performative and communicative. Their goal is to insert themselves into the public sphere and make visible another version of events (286).

In terms of the manipulation of cultural artifacts for national identity, what is at stake in this case is not only a battle of signs but a clash of alternative scripts for modernity. Here we can distinguish at least three main narrative and performance practices of modernity. On the one hand, the technocratic direction pursued by the last three Mexican governments established a hierarchy of signifiers imposing the hegemony of the well-educated politician. Another version of modernity in dispute is that of the career politician or the hard-core populist leader from the Cárdenas era (1934-1940) relying on the official history and mythologies of the PRI. Finally, the third option is that sought by the emerging social organizations, that of a civil society with more

fluid forms of political and economic negotiation and incompatible with the other two options mentioned here. At present, the dominant model is that of the Ivy League technocrat who has become the guru for debt negotiation and neoliberal modernization. This figure is the quasi-sacerdotal performer of a highly ritualized government structure (Centeno 220; Krauze 420).

In Mexico, during the Salinas administration, the neoliberal model invariably followed all over Latin America was complemented by changes in education and the construction of a nationalist self-image by the Mexican government. An important example of this practice was the attempted recuperation of the figure of Porfirio Díaz. Traditionally, textbooks and popular history have always insisted on the authoritarian aspects of Díaz's office and the cruelty and discriminatory practices of the economic structure fostered by the pre-revolutionary dictator (Centeno 37). In contrast with this image, and not without some historical accuracy, the revamped image of Díaz renders the figure of the last hero of the nineteenth-century liberal era a soldier, strategist, and significantly one of the most aggressive modernizers in terms of economic infrastructure. During the last ten years of his mandate, Díaz gave foreign investment a top priority. Construction of railroads and mining concessions were handed over to French, English, but mostly to U.S. companies (De la Peña 175).

Resurrecting Porfirio Díaz's role in Mexican history symbolically eases the enforcement of the globalizing and integrating policies the neoliberal formulas presently prescribe. The risk is one of giving the presidency an image of open "pro-yankeeism," something anathema to traditional Mexican nationalism promoted by the state since 1921. Therefore, it is important to reinforce the changes in policy with a discourse that could legitimize such a shift. To that effect, elementary school books change the characterization of Díaz's era to one of internationalization and openness to the world, diluting obvious signs of exploitation present in previous editions. Televisa, the monopolistic communications corporation, rises to the challenge of restoring Díaz as well. In the soap opera *El vuelo del águila*, the portrait of Díaz is one of a virile, intelligent, and nationalist politician. To deal with Díaz's less heroic side the *telenovela* had a grand finale in which the old president received punishment for his authoritarian excesses with exile in the form of a tormented *memento mori*.

In contrast with these portrayals of the past, El Barzón chooses to represent itself through a less fluid and more traditional reading of

the Mexican Revolution. Its very name, "El Barzón," is one of the most popular pieces of the revolutionary *corrido* repertoire. This anonymous song has been part of movies featuring Pedro Infante, has been sung by Amparo Ochoa and widely reproduced by the recording industry. The message is openly anti-government, speaking out directly against Díaz and the church.

Me decía mi prenda amada:	My beloved said :
—¡que vaya el patrón al cuerno!	—to hell with the master!
cómo tuviéramos de hambre	how we'd starve
si te has seguido creyendo	if you continued to believe
de lo que te decía el cura,	what the priest told you
de las penas del infierno.	about the sorrows of hell.
¡Viva la revolución!	Long live the revolution!
¡Muera el supremo gobierno!	Death to the supreme government!
¡Se me reventó el barzón	The hitch broke
y siempre seguí sembrando!	and still I planted!

(Kuri and Mendoza 420, my translation)

In the final stanza the call for revolutionary action comes from the housewife, or *prenda amada.* She makes her husband realize the precarious situation in which they live. On the other hand, she does not claim to take matters into her own hands. Therefore, in the *corrido* the woman is allowed to speak, but does not take direct action. It is important to notice that not all of the meanings of the song are relevant to contemporary *barzonistas.* For instance, the traditional gender relation found in these lines is at odds with the increasing participation of women in *barzonismo* (Lovera 34). What is really important for a *barzonista* reading of this song is the denunciatory and defiant tone towards authority.

The criticism of the Mexican economic structure expressed in the song fits perfectly with *barzonista* claims of illegal property seizures, usury and impossible-to-understand financial statements. From the wife's voice comes the idea of group action.

Cuando llegué a mi casita,	When I got home
me decía mi prenda amada:	my beloved said:
¿on'ta el maíz que te tocó?	where's your share of corn?
Le respondí yo muy triste:	Sadly I answered:
—El patrón se lo llevó	—The master took it
por lo que debía en la hacienda	for what I owed the *hacienda*

pero me dijo el patrón
que contara con la tienda.
Ora voy a trabajar
para seguirle abonando,
veinte pesos, diez centavos
son los que salgo restando,
me decía mi prenda amada:
—¡Ya no trabajes con ese hombre,
nomás nos está robando!
Anda al salón de sesiones,
que te lleve mi compadre,
ya no le hagas caso al padre,
¡él y sus excomuniones!

but the master said
I should count on his store.
Now I'll work
to keep paying installments
twenty pesos, ten cents
is what I owe,
my beloved said:
—Work no more for that man,
he is just robbing us!
Go to the meetings,
ask my *compadre* to take you,
don't listen to the priest,
him and his excommunications!

(Kuri and Mendoza 420, my translation)

Since *barzonistas* are recycling these concepts, it seems there is a clash of "selective traditions" (Williams 116). On one side there is the refashioning of Diaz's modernizing pushed by governmental elites to support their neoliberal plan. On the other, *barzonistas* adhere to the popular readings of revolutionary events and figures reinforced by the media in response to the Zapatista movement.

One of the main strategic accomplishments of *barzonismo* has been the consolidation of an alliance between the rural classes since small- and large-scale farmers have not always presented a united front. Moreover, the lyrics of the *corrido* "El Barzón" have reflected different periods of the rural class's internal relations. The song suffered several transformations due to different types of conflicts. Economic and social relations among "agraristas" (communal land owners) and medium-sized landholders have not always been marked by cooperation as they are now under *barzonismo.* Given the fact that land distribution since 1910 has neither been an egalitarian nor a well-planned process, regular conflict has arisen between farmers and *agraristas* (Bartra 66-93; León and Marván 39). The former fought legally for what is called a "certificado de inafectabilidad," a land-tenure status that protects medium-sized landholdings from being distributed among potential *agraristas.* Oftentimes too, *agraristas* would work seasonally for bigger farmers when their small plots of land were already worked out. By doing this they became a labor force subjected to the control of better-off farmers. Therefore, animosities among these two classes were not infrequent throughout Mexico. A 1930 version of the corrido "El Barzón" reflects this:

Me dijo la vida mía,
pobrecita, hasta llorando:
—No trabajes con ese hombre,
nomás nos está robando;
mejor métete a agrarista,
anda con el Comité
que te apunten allí en su lista.
¿No aprendes a mi compadre,
a mi hermano y a su yerno,
'tan sembrando muy a gusto
tierras que les dio el Gobierno?
. . .
—Que vaya el patrón al cuerno.
¡Cómo estuviéramos de hambre,
si te has seguido creyendo
de lo que te decía el cura
de las penas del infierno!
¡Viva la Revolución!
¡Viva el Supremo Gobierno!
Hay que seguirles la pista.
Les digo a mis compañeros:
—¡No hay como ser agrarista!

My beloved said,
poor thing, she was even crying:
—Work no more for that man,
he is just robbing us;
rather become an *agrarista*
go to the Committee
and sign up.
Don't you learn from my *compadre*,
from his brother and son in law,
who are happily seeding
lands the Government gave them?
. . .
—To hell with the master.
How we'd starve
if you believed
what the priest said
about the sorrows of hell!
Long live the Revolution!
Long live the Supreme Government!
You must follow the trail.
I tell my comrades:
—There's nothing like being an *agrarista*!

(Romero-Flores 313, my translation)

The changes in this version emphasize the negative roles of the wealthy landowner and the Church. This time the government is spared as it provides the key element: land. The process of land redistribution in Mexico has been very unequal, arbitrary and subject to different symbolic readings through time. Not until the 1980s were efforts made to stop it definitively in response to the failure of the Mexican agrarian model as assessed by neoliberal logic. The Salinas administration promoted and passed the constitutional amendments of 1991 which allowed for the sale of the *parcela agrarista* granted decades before (Fuentes and Lumbreras 259). This was the final blow to the populist economic models of the PRI after 1940.

Through this last version of "El Barzón" we can contrast different readings of a cultural artifact produced amidst social conflict. From this comparison we can observe how traditions become fluid in the hands of a social movement of resistance. A song can be reshaped or re-inscribed to actualize its meaning, making it fit the present.

Barzonistas have recuperated the original lyrics, ignoring the more modern versions. Thus, the song's negative criticism is aimed (as in the first version) at the government and the bankers, not the church. "El Barzón" is now an anthem for a group that cuts across class barriers, a group made out of former rural opponents and other classes that have never before joined with peasants and farmers. Their drawing inspiration from traditional revolutionary songs marks the forms of resistance the group is using to claim social power against the ideological manipulations of government propaganda (Fiske 509).

Since the "Mexican Miracle" era the rural population began a large-scale exodus to urban centers. During the decade of the mid-40s to the mid-50s, the Mexican economy reaped the benefits of accelerated growth due to a model of development based on import-substituting industrialization (Enríquez 7). Industry grew steadily in Mexico City and other provincial capitals. This development attracted millions of rural Mexicans to work in the more industrialized urban areas. This process resisted all urban planning efforts with disastrous results. Mexico City is now the biggest city in the world with a population of approximately16 million (Davis 2).

The aforementioned process of mobilization is also a metaphor for the whole political system. The magnitude of metropolitan Mexico City allows for the high degree of centralization for decision-making and the high concentration of power in Mexico City. Unmistakably, the metropolis is the locus of power, the core of political life and the focus of attention for the rest of the nation. It is also a space profusely marked by the production of signifiers of power and the location of the accumulation of museographic knowledge, the site where concepts of nationality are coined, regulated, and kept. It is the place of important national rituals like the Virgin of Guadalupe procession on December twelfth; the official parade on November the twentieth to commemorate the start of the Mexican Revolution and the May Day Parade (*el Día del Trabajo* or Labor Day). This last date is the most important to our discussion here because thousands of workers traditionally march to express their compliance with the system in a ritual of official power legitimization.

Not surprisingly, one of the most meaningful performances for El Barzón was a march with tractors and other machinery used in production to capital cities through different states, eventually ending up in Mexico City on the first of May. This performance was an attempt to reenact the exodus of the 40s and 50s. The idea was paral-

lel to that of the tradition of the official parades but this time signalled disapproval and made claims for restitution. These tactics were thought necessary to reach the mass media in an effective way.

> The efficacy of these movements depends, in turn, on the reorganization of the public space. Their actions have a low impact when they are limited to using traditional forms of communication (oral, or artesanal production, or in written texts that circulate from person to person). Their power grows if they act in mass networks: not only the urban presence of a demonstration of one or two hundred thousand persons, but—even more—their capacity to interfere with the normal functioning of a city and find support, for that very reason, in the electronic information media. Then, sometimes, the sense of the urban is restored and the massive ceases to be a vertical system of diffusion to become a larger expression of local powers, a complementing of the fragments. (García Canclini 210)

***Barzonistas* entering Guadalajara in September, 1993**

For *barzonistas* the main motivation for this new exodus was to increase the exposure the group was receiving. When *barzonistas* moved their machines into small town plazas, the impact was definitely local,

and not meant to provoke a national response to their demands. Eventually the *barzonistas* wanted to reach a bigger public and put on more striking performances. One of the first provincial capitals to experience their presence was Guadalajara, Jalisco. Along with Monterrey in Northern Mexico, and Puebla in the center, Guadalajara is one of the centers of commercial activity and industrial production. A march to this important urban center was certain to capture national attention.

In late September of 1993, tractors and farm implements were transported through the main artery of the Western coastal state of Jalisco. They went down the Guadalajara-Colima highway, the customary trek for heavyweight freighters transporting all kinds of goods from the Pacific port of Manzanillo to the markets of Guadalajara and Mexico City. Traffic was slowed down for hours and the convoy entered Guadalajara to take the "Plaza de los Laureles" next to the Cathedral , in front of the Government Building (*Escenas*). The machines stayed there for 45 days or so, only to leave for a blockade of the Airport Highway. There, in an "accident", a trailer loaded with iron structures destroyed two of their tractors. Interestingly enough, neither the local nor the national media reported the event. Despite the angry protests and the disruption of normal activity in downtown Guadalajara, the media, especially television, failed to broadcast the event.

The television and radio boycott continued until late 1995. Today, the impact of the movement is always minimized. This can be clearly seen in the following comment of a PRI Senator:

> González Gortazar se refirió al problema de las carteras vencidas, del que dijo se reestructuró en un 74 por ciento durante 1994. Respecto a 'El Barzón', en el sentido de declarar moratoria indefinida a los bancos, el senador de extracción priísta aseguró que este movimiento agrupa a un reducido número de campesinos, 'nunca ha sido ni será una agrupación representativa de los verdaderos agricultores y ganaderos', reiteró. (Martínez 67)

González Gortazar spoke about the problem of default loans, saying 74 per cent of the total was renegotiated in 1994. Regarding the *barzonista* proposal for an indefinite moratorium against the banks, the PRI senator argued that the movement was just a bunch of peasants. "They have never been and won't be a representative group of real farmers and cattle raisers" he explained (my translation).

The issue at stake here was representation in terms of political mediation between the state and farmers. This leader used a tactic common among Mexican politicians and intellectuals called *ninguneo*: the non-acknowledgement of the discourse or presence of the other (Paz 125). *Ninguneo* allows the speaker to minimize or ignore the power of representation of another. It is clear, for example, in how the revolutionary rhetoric of the Zapatistas and the autochthonous character the media has ascribed to the EZLN made it more marketable and attractive. On the other hand, membership in El Barzón has proved that media attention is not necessary to the success of a social movement.

In November of 1993 the *barzonistas* finally started to head to Mexico City with a long trail of 114 tractors. They expected many more to join along the way. Unfortunately, the convoy was halted in Celaya, Guanajuato by the Federal Highway Police. Maximilano Barbosa Llamas, one of the *barzonista* leaders, was incarcerated under charges of "attempted damage to public property against the integrity of the highways," an absurd charge against a man driving on the highway in a vehicle equipped with rubber tires.

It became apparent that the capital is not always a space open to non-urban demonstrators. The main stage is not open to all performances. However, the symbolic value of re-enacting a rural exodus is very important. The farm machine as a tool for working the fields is re-used as a tool for communication. The image of a tractor march as a performance is very powerful. The act implies that 1) rural space is not delimited by the furrow, that it actually has connections with other public spaces; 2) the rural population is re-claiming some space in the city in return for its contribution of food; 3) a product of technology that is also a tool can be decontextualized to manifest its technically useless presence in space separate from capital; 4) instead of the daily supply of food arriving for the consumption of the city, farmers bring their machines to remind urban citizens that behind anonymous production there are real workers; 5) slowing down traffic disturbs the work of others, provoking responses that may trigger reflection on the political and economic conditions of society.

In Guadalajara, the public responded with solidarity. The machines were cheered as they passed by. When they parked in the plaza, drivers and peasants were fed by the store clerks of the downtown area. Although in the first phase *barzonistas* did not get what they wanted, the visibility of their performances allowed the movement to

grow in notoriety and membership. Due to the limited effect of their public stage appearances in Guadalajara, Zacatecas, Morelia, and Chihuahua, they tried to reach a wider audience. How the authorities reacted to the attempted performance in Mexico City has already been mentioned. Nonetheless, by 1994 and 1995 the members of "El Barzón Metropolitano" (the Mexico City chapter) succeeded in using the city as the main stage for their own performances as we will describe shortly.

With the spread of *barzonista* activism beyond the low and middle rural/semi-urban classes to other social groups, performances changed too. As is the case of the medium-sized landholders and peasants, the small and medium-sized store owners, microentrepreneurs, taxi drivers, and small bank stock holders also are unhappy with the banking practices of the newly-reprivatized Mexican financial institutions. The ultimate consequences of these practices included inability to repay loans, a soaring number of overdue accounts payable, the loss of credit lines and property seizures.

In a society of growing consumerism, access to credit lines is not only an economic but also a psychological need:

> Credit is perceived as a consumer's right and ultimately as an economic right for the citizen. Any restriction on the possibilities of credit is resented as a repressive measure from the State. A total suppression of credit (by any means unthinkable) would be experienced by society at large as a suppression of a fundamental freedom. (Baudrillard 185, my translation)

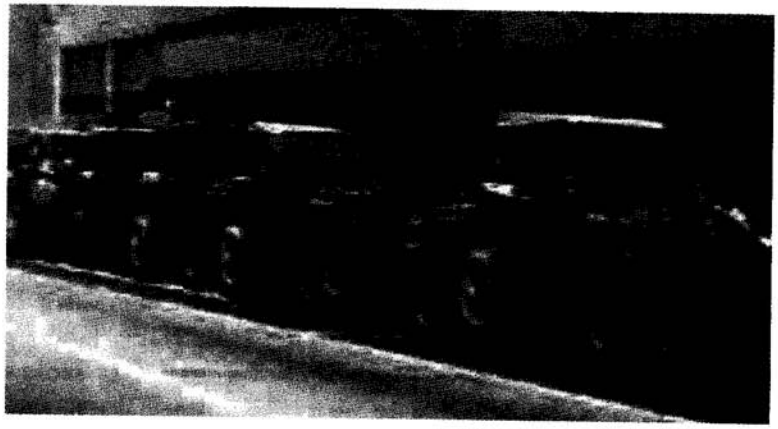
The general reaction of the middle class leads one to think that this principle is applicable to the Mexican credit crisis. Taking this into account, a reaction against the suppression of a basic right could be seen as a mobilization of resistance against governmental repression. Due to the financial nature of these repressive actions, the symbols used to perform resistance are, ironically, those used by the banking system itself.

On April 7, 1995, the Mexico City chapter of El Barzón performed the first burning of credit cards:

> Alrededor de 350 *barzonistas* realizaron ayer frente a las instalaciones de la Asociación de Banqueros de México la quema de 2 mil 500 tarjetas de crédito, en protesta por las altas tasas de interés, el elevado costo del incremento del IVA y la exigencia porque se establezca un

> programa de reestructuración que considere a los más de 8 millones de tarjetahabientes del país. (Gómez Flores)
>
> About 350 Barzonistas staged yesterday a burning of 2,500 credit cards in front of the National Banker's Association. They were protesting the high interest rates, the high cost of the IVA tax and demanded to establish a program for debt renegotiation for 8 million credit card holders in the nation. (my translation)

Notice the strategic place of performance. This time *barzonistas* are not aiming at public spaces devoted to nationalist rituals. Their eloquence is directed precisely at the group personally involved in the crisis, the bankers. The act is staged close to the private sphere of action of those whom they considered responsible for their problems. Burning the instrument that supposedly represented the "privilege and freedom" to possess desired objects in advance is tantamount to renouncing them. Since exercising the privilege of credit becomes a threat to the indivual's way of living, burning a credit card could be



Blocking banks in Guadalajara

perceived as burning an instrument that has turned against the user. Symbolically, these new Luddites are eliminating the concrete sign that represents the abstract system oppressing them. On the other hand, by burning the means of access to objects of desire, *barzonista* cardholders are curtailing their own access to ephemeral gratification derived from consumerism. In this way they are exposing the blurred relation between the profits of financial institutions and the highly-

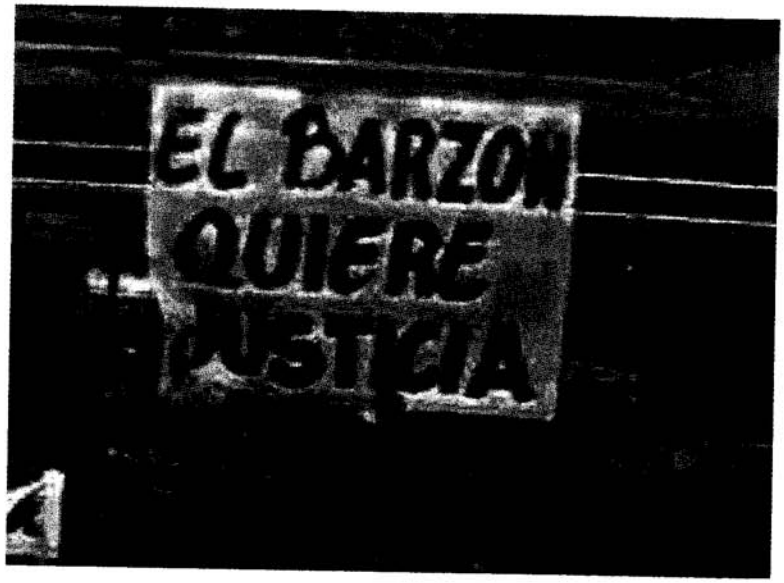
priced pleasures they promised. Bank executives could not help but look on with concern. If 25 per cent of the total of eight million credit card holders have overdue balances, the bankers would feel the pressure of losing two million faithful clients. Suddenly, the abstract system that reported profits would shrink to three quarters of its original size. Apparently, the burning of the plastic money becomes a very concrete sign of bankruptcy.

In a similar vein, one of the first performative acts carried out by *barzonistas* was to hamper public access to banks (Pinkerton18). Given the possibility of losing their land (their place of work) farmers are metaphorically reproducing a similar situation for bankers, blocking access to their work space with tractors. In many cases, farmers owe money on the same machines they are using to perform their acts of obstruction. Thus, before these machines are seized by creditors, *barzonistas* transform them into instruments of protest in the hope that with their demands they will eventually ease the pressure from the financial institutions. The machine in *barzonista* hands becomes an instrument of denunciation and struggle. Different codes are superimposed on the logic of a farming machine, re-territorializing its instrumentality. A tool for sowing in the fields becomes a message of defiance and discontent on the doorstep of a bank.

Another performing practice staged by the rural *barzonista* chapters is the taunting of lawyers. This carnivalesque act includes the mobilization of *barzonista* groups which refer to themselves as "commandos for civil resistance." When a lawyer is about to perform a seizure of property or auction goods belonging to a *barzonista*, the commando is called into action. The performance usually takes place in front of a courthouse. One or two members enter the courthouse and keep an eye on the lawyer in question, signalling the moment the lawyer is ready to leave. Then, a certain number of commando members draw the lawyer out of the courthouse, shave his head, pour molasses over his entire body and coat him with feathers.

If police happen to be around, some of the group, oftentimes women, grab the policemen's rifles, immobilizing them while the prank is being performed. So far, only male lawyers have suffered the molasses treatment, in part because it is an atack on their masculinity. There is a strong cathartic element in these performances. It is also a powerful dissuasive act that has deterred many local lawyers from pursuing cases turned over to them by the banks. Although these acts demon-

strate disrespect for law professionals they do not represent what *barzonistas* think of laws in general. In fact, one of the main components of their public discourse is based on a strict reading of the Constitution.



El Barzón wants justice. Plaza de los Laureles, Guadalajara

As we mentioned before, *barzonistas* have denounced the banking system by working through legal channels. There are more than 4,000 lawsuits against local and national banking institutions that are to be heard in court. El Barzón now has the support of the National Bar of Lawyers to assist not only in countersuing the banks but also in writing bill proposals for modifications to fiscal and mercantile law (Muñoz).

Originating from a small group performing acts of civil disobedience, the *barzonista* movement has become a full-fledged social force. Various *barzonista* chapters are urging reforms of economic laws and changing the way Mexican society organizes itself. The organization is not openly revolutionary but oppositional in character. The manipulation of cultural artifacts in *barzonista* performances counteracts technocratic efforts to impose the script of modernity that governmental elites believe all Mexicans should follow. El Barzón problematizes the way the culture of politics and politics of culture have been played out in Mexico.

As García Canclini suggests, these kinds of groups come in and out of modernity and enact postmodernity with modern instruments. The transclass character of the movement suggests to us that class and hegemony are more fluid than we formerly thought. The organizational capacity of the *barzonistas* is also a good example of the "decollection" process that social groups are experiencing at the end of this century (García Canclini 281). In other words, the corporatist collections of peasants and workers arranged under the aegis of an undisputed party is dismantled when alliances between urban middle-class bank stock holders and *rancheros* from Michoacán and Jalisco are formed. Under this new organizational logic, dissident school teachers suddenly fraternize with taxi drivers to accrue pressure for reform, even though they belong to very different and supposedly separate sectors of society.

Another surprising effect is that popular perceptions of the power of knowledge have begun to change. The politicians who have graduated from North American Ivy League universities have lost the automatic prestige they previously enjoyed in Mexico. Especially after the electoral advancement of the opposition in the 1996 elections, Mexican technocrats need to work harder for popular support from a more politically heterogeneous and distrustful population. Governability becomes a very complex affair in a society more and more critical of a project of globalization in which people are forced to live as *braceros* and deterritorialized individuals. The intensification of migratory movements and the deepening economic crisis have lessened spatial and economic distances, with the consequence being a political awareness and participation unheard of since the years of *cardenismo* (1934-40).

For academics and the media, an adequate analysis of El Barzón's politics of representation and organizational strategies requires more than objectivity. These phenomena have extensions that go beyond the customary limits of the public sphere, with interdependencies and oppositions with the government and other social forces (like the Zapatistas) that demand a multi-perspective approach to the study of social movements. Cultural artifacts in use include logos, slogans, visual texts, parodies, highly ritualized performances, songs, machines, highways, and constitutional amendment proposals. These symbols are intertwined with the social signs of late capitalist life and to study them requires a far more complicated approach than that of pure class or discourse analysis. This has been only a quick view of the fast-rolling video clip of Mexican history.

Notes

[1]Most of the information for this paper comes from newspapers and videos produced by the news media in Mexico or by *barzonistas*. Other information comes from oral accounts drawn on field work during two visits to Mexico in December 1993 and the summer of 1995.

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