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# How Does Civil Society Thicken? The Political Construction of Social Capital in Rural Mexico

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**Summary.** — The growth of the building-block organizations of an autonomous civil society in an authoritarian environment depends on the “political construction” of social capital. Social capital can be coproduced by state and local societal actors or by the interaction of local societal actors and external actors in civil society. Social capital may also be produced from below, but external allies still turn out to be crucial in the ability of such organizations to survive. An examination of variety in political dynamics across different regions and over time in rural Mexico provides ample illustration of these general points. Copyright © 1996 Elsevier Science Ltd

## 1. INTRODUCTION

How do the building-block organizations of an autonomous civil society emerge and grow in authoritarian environments? How can state action block or encourage the broadening and strengthening of organizations that can represent diverse societal interests? To explain the production of social capital, analytical frameworks need to account for widely varying outcomes — over time, space and social groups. One promising approach is to hold the broad context as “constant” as possible, comparing diverse regions or social groups within nation-states.<sup>1</sup> So far, however, much of the literature on social capital has focused on societies governed by political democracies. This article explores pathways for the “thickening” of civil society under less-than-democratic conditions.

To explain the diversity of outcomes within actually existing societies, one must “unpack” both state and society. Under what circumstances do “prosocial capital” actors in both state and society manage to converge? When one steps back to explain the societal outcomes found in the case of rural Mexico, it turns out that diverse subnational results emerged from three distinct political pathways: coproduction between state and societal actors, coproduction between external and local societal actors, and independent mobilization from below.

Societal “thickness” refers to the breadth and density of representative societal organizations, and can also be thought of in terms of social capital accumulation. Putnam’s definition of social capital as the “stock” of “norms of reciprocity and networks of civic engagement” helps explain how citizens overcome the

classic textbook obstacles to collective action (1993, p. 167). His work puts two distinct causal arguments on the agenda: social capital as potential *cause* of good governance and economic development, and social capital as the *result* of path-dependent historical legacies.<sup>2</sup> Most discussions of this study have tended to conflate these two issues, but they are logically and empirically distinct. This article focuses on the second question: how civil societies thicken.<sup>3</sup> One of the challenges facing the emerging literature on social capital is how to build in the role that political conflict plays in shaping state relations with “social capitalists.” Otherwise it is difficult to explain why some state actors are constructive partners while others are violent enemies of social capital formation.

Most explanations of collective action and civil society-building are either state or society-driven. On the society side, there is the “historical determinist” explanation of social capital formation, including some who stress social structure and others who take values and cultures as givens. Much of the social movement literature stresses political strategy, ideology and leadership, emphasizing consciousness, action, “solidary incentives” and socially constructed

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collective identities to explain how people overcome the obstacles to joint action. From the state side, the resource mobilization and new institutional approaches stress the centrality of rules and incentives that induce societal responses, but they do not explain the origins of the institutions. Most state or society-centered approaches tend to treat the other arena as a residual "black box". Patterns of constructive mutual support between state and societal actors may not be common, but they challenge "one-way" approaches to state-society relations.

To explain patterns of state-society synergy, one must analyze both with an interactive framework that can capture the processes of mutual influence between state and society. A "political construction" approach focuses on recursive cycles of interaction between state and societal actors to account for the uneven emergence of representative societal organizations under less-than-democratic conditions.<sup>4</sup> Such cycles of state-society conflict and coalition-building may or may not lead to social capital accumulation; both state and societal elites can either block or encourage autonomous collective action. The problem is not only in explaining how the accumulation or dismantling of social capital unfolds, but how each process can unfold simultaneously. In other words, the same state can include competing factions that act at crosspurposes — consciously or not — with some attacking societal groups that other state actors support.

Three conceptual building blocks contribute to the development of a "political construction" approach to the uneven emergence of social capital under authoritarian regimes. They include: political opportunities, social energy and ideas, and the processes of "scaling up" local representation and bargaining power.

First, elite political conflicts have an independent causal effect on civil society's capacity to organize because they determine the state's willingness and capacity to encourage or dismantle social capital. Associational life does not unfold in a vacuum: state or external societal actors can provide either positive incentives or negative sanctions for collective action. This point draws from Tarrow's "political opportunity structure" approach, where collective action emerges largely in response to: "changes in opportunities that lower the costs of collective action, reveal potential allies and show where elites and authorities are vulnerable" (1994, p. 18).

Even in less-than-democratic regimes, reformist officials can create positive incentives for collective action from below, as the Mexican government's rural development reforms of the 1930s, and the mid-1970s and early 1980s indicate. In the case of the Community Food Councils of the early 1980s, these channels for participatory community oversight of government consumer food subsidy programs made region-wide networking possible for village-level organizations for the first time in many rural areas

(Fox, 1992a; 1992b). Government reformists created positive incentives: if participation succeeded in making the program work, then communities received the material incentive of reduced food prices through more competitive local markets (a public good). The program also provided the community-managed transportation necessary to bring local representatives together over wide distances. But state reformists' most important contribution to collective action was not their offer of positive incentives. Rather, it was the capacity to buffer the negative sanctions that other state actors usually deployed against autonomous collective action beyond the village level. Official reformists legitimized regional associational autonomy and therefore provided some measure of protection for scaled-up collective action. Both the positive incentives and the buffering of the negative sanctions matter, but the first helps little without the second.<sup>5</sup> This point reinforces Tversky and Kahneman's emphasis on "loss aversion" for explaining collective action. They stress that potential actors fear losses more than they value gains, and the related importance of subjective framing of contingencies and outcomes (1990).<sup>6</sup>

The second conceptual building block of the political construction approach involves taking actors, their ideas and motivations into account to explain how people respond to political opportunities (or threats). Historical legacies certainly shape the ways in which actors respond to positive and negative incentives for collective action, but they do not respond in automatic or unidirectional ways. Contingent ideas, leadership and action influence whether grievances are defined as shared and whether problems are interpreted as subject to change.<sup>7</sup>

Hirschman's "Principle of Conservation and Mutation of Social Energy" is useful here (1984). Hirschman acknowledges that most of the time, failed efforts at collective action lead people to turn away from public life — Putnam's "low civicness" equilibrium state. But since Hirschman is more interested in explaining collective action than its absence, he looks for the exceptions. First he stresses the role of external aggression in provoking resistance, which is well known, but then he turns to cases where such unifying factors are not present. After studying a wide range of community development groups in Latin America, he found that many of them

shared one striking characteristic: when we looked into the life histories of the people principally involved, we found that most of them had previously participated in other, generally more "radical" experiences of collective action, that had generally not achieved their objective, often because of official repression. It is as though the protagonists' earlier aspiration for social change, their bent for collective action, had not really left them even though the movements in which they had participated may have aborted or petered out. Later on, this "social

energy" becomes active again but is likely to take some very different form (1984, pp. 42–43).

The usual response to failed collective action is demobilization, but it turns out that those initiatives that people manage to sustain in inhospitable environments are also often responses to past failures. For Hirschman, success can come from previous failure, whereas for Putnam only past success explains success. But why does civic failure lead to frustration and powerlessness in some cases, while it is "conserved and mutated" into constructive social energy in others? Perhaps freedom of association is both cause and effect of society-building — once one gets a little, one can get more, as with Putnam's virtuous circles of social capital formation. Yet it is also possible that a little bit of freedom of association leads threatened elites to murder local leaders. Then what happens? When does repression lead to a downward spiral of demobilization, versus the many cases, as in Chiapas, where the murder of local leaders inspires others to take their place and mobilization continues. In other words, repression cuts both ways, simultaneously facilitating collective action by sharpening the "us" vs. "them" distinction, while increasing the price to be paid for it. The impact, on balance, is politically contingent. Political ideas and culture may make the difference here, though, as is often the case, ideas are granted causal weight when more tangible factors cannot explain the outcome.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, a more dynamic, actor-oriented approach to collective action gives more weight to the social capitalists, their motivations, and their decisions about whether and how to persist in spite of the odds against them. Leaders are those who pay the "irrational" start-up costs of mobilization, long before collective action reaches the critical mass needed to produce any tangible benefits for participants (Oliver, Marwell and Texeira, 1985).

The third building block in the political construction approach unpacks social capital and highlights the importance of those organizations whose efforts create opportunities for others to engage in autonomous collective action. Social capital is not homogeneous: some kinds of organizations have more public good "spillover effects" than others. The premise here is that bargaining power is necessary to create respect for freedom of association, which in turn requires some degree of "scaling up" of organization beyond the most local level.<sup>9</sup>

For some analysts, the nature of the unit of social capital is not relevant. For Putnam, the micro-units of choral societies and soccer clubs are taken to be indicators of the stock of social capital spread throughout society. This view assumes that social capital is "continuously distributed" both horizontally and vertically. If this assumption were valid, then many of Mexico's poorest regions would be considered to have large stocks of social capital. They are covered with

strong horizontal associational webs at the most local level. Yet these are precisely the country's poorest regions, with the worst systems of governance in terms of both process and performance. The answers lie in both society and the state. On the societal side, strong local solidarities may or may not extend beyond villages or neighborhoods.<sup>10</sup> Nagengast and Kearney's study of the social construction of indigenous ethnicity showed both the local confines of village-based identities and the importance of collective action in encouraging broader shared identities (1990). The state also plays an active role in either blocking or promoting the expansion of solitary ties beyond the village level.<sup>11</sup> Most important, state actors have regularly used force to deny indigenous Mexican communities the opportunity to scale up and form organizations of sufficient scale to defend their interests.<sup>12</sup> In short, social capital cannot be assumed to be continuously distributed, especially where freedom of association is not guaranteed.

Scaling up is especially important for representing the interests of dispersed populations, since they have the greatest difficulty defining common interests and are the most vulnerable to "divide and conquer" efforts from above.<sup>13</sup> If they do develop scaled-up organizations, they are then among the most vulnerable to the "iron law of oligarchy," since dispersed populations have little capacity to monitor the activities of their leadership and therefore have little capacity to hold them accountable.<sup>14</sup> The category of "region" is defined here as it is by rural social movements in Mexico — regional movements usually involve dozens of villages, often covering several municipalities, but usually do not cover an entire state.<sup>15</sup>

Regional organizations are especially important for representing the interests of dispersed and oppressed groups for three main reasons: overcoming locally confined solidarities, representative bargaining power and access to information.

—There is no reason to assume that community-based horizontal associations have ties with other communities. Dense concentrations of social capital may well be highly segmented across spatial and ethnic divides. Regional organizations can facilitate collective action in defense of shared interests by helping to overcome the socially constructed constraints of locally confined solidarities.

—Strictly local organizations usually lack the clout to offset concentrated elite power, while national organizations are usually less representative of local diversity. Regional groups potentially combine the strengths of scaling up with closer ties to local bases. Horizontal networks within and between such regional groups, in turn, have the capacity to offset the threat of the "iron law of oligarchy" inherent in vertical pyramidal structures.

—In societies where the vast majority lack access to independent mass media, autonomous regional organizations are often the only means for transmitting information about shared problems and common enemies that is

the precondition for broader interest articulation and collective action.

Regional collective action may be necessary to offset the power of authoritarian elites, but these are precisely the kind of movements most likely to be targeted for repression. To sum up, historical legacies of horizontal organization are necessary but not sufficient to accumulate social capital. The scale of horizontal organization matters as well, and this is in turn conditioned largely by the political opportunity structure (which determines the availability of external allies to provide support and to offset the threat of repression).

## 2. A POLITICAL CONSTRUCTION APPROACH<sup>16</sup>

These three conceptual building blocks — political opportunities, social energy and scaling up — can be assembled into an iterative “political construction” approach to the emergence and consolidation of social capital under authoritarian rule. This framework involves cumulative cycles of conflict as well as cooperation. The key conflict is between the promoters and the enemies of horizontal collective action, both usually embedded in the state as well as society. In this approach, horizontal social organizations are able to grow and spread in inhospitable environments through iterative cycles of conflict between three key actors: the “social capitalists” themselves, authoritarian elites unwilling to share power, and reformist allies based either within the state or elsewhere in society. Reformists are defined here as those state or societal elites willing to accept (or encourage) increased associational autonomy among excluded groups in society.<sup>17</sup>

The point of departure is that as long as authoritarian elites remain united, there is little room for the construction of basic citizenship rights, which in turn are a precondition for consolidating autonomous representative organizations. If authoritarian elites split, however, for whatever reason — succession problems, economic crisis or war — they will differ over whether to respond to societal challenges with repression or concessions. Intraelite divisions can be triggered by societal pressure from below. For example, the Zapatista rebellion, based in a handful of remote municipalities, led to a deep split within Mexico’s national political class over whether to respond militarily or politically.

The first step in the argument, then, is that reformists, defined by their greater concern for political legitimacy and resulting preference for negotiation over coercion, may conflict with hard-line colleagues over whether and how to cede access to the state. Second, if and when such cracks in the system open

up, social organizations often attempt to occupy these spaces from below, demanding broader access to the state while trying to defend their capacity to articulate their own interests autonomously.<sup>18</sup> These efforts at social capital formation usually provoke an authoritarian backlash, which in turn ends the cycle of opening from above. Third, over time, these recursive cycles of bargaining between ruling hard-liners, reformist elites, and societal groups can gradually increase official tolerance for autonomous social organizations, often in a “two steps forward, one step back” pattern.

From the point of view of social capital accumulation, the key issue is how much societal political residue — whether organized or informal — is left after each window of opportunity closes, and how it can be sustained until the next one opens. Even though societal actors often fail to win their immediate demands, if they manage to conserve some degree of autonomy in the troughs between cycles of mobilization, they retain a crucial resource to deploy at the next political opportunity.

This process is highly uneven within nation-states. Societal groups gain legitimacy and leverage at very different rates and in different bargaining arenas. The iterative nature of this pattern helps to explain why such different patterns of state-society relations can coexist simultaneously within the same nation-state: redoubts of persistent authoritarian clientelism can coexist with new enclaves of pluralist tolerance, as well as large grey areas of “semi-clientelism” in between. The authoritarian and pluralistic poles of this proposed continuum from clientelism to citizenship are easily defined, but the multiplicity of political relationships “in between” challenges analysts to develop categories more appropriate to systems in transition (especially since many regimes in transition tend to get stuck short of a democratic threshold). This framework suggests that the category of “semi-clientelism” might be useful to frame those state-society relationships that fall in between authoritarian clientelism and pluralist citizenship rights. Semi-clientelist authorities attempt to condition access to state benefits on political subordination. In contrast to conventional authoritarian clientelism, however, their leverage is the threat of the withdrawal of carrots, without the threat of the stick.

## 3. INDIGENOUS CIVIL SOCIETY IN RURAL MEXICO

Rural Mexico has experienced a wide range of processes through which social capital “thickens” where it might seem “thinnest.” Conditions for social capital formation seem most daunting for the more than one in 10 Mexicans who speak an indigenous language. They are the poorest of the poor, and they lack representation in the broader society and political sys-

tem. Mexico's indigenous population is the largest in the hemisphere, including over 10 million people in 56 officially recognized ethno-linguistic groups.

When one looks closely at the village level, however, social capital is widespread. In much of indigenous Mexico, communities have reproduced long-standing traditions of horizontal cooperation, reciprocity and self-help. Thousands of villages make community decisions about resource allocation and justice by consensus, and they maintain powerful norms of accountability between leaders and community members.<sup>19</sup> There are increasing religious and class cleavages within many communities, as well as cultural differences provoked by emigration, but the overall degree of survival of horizontal organizations and norms of reciprocity in indigenous Mexico is quite remarkable.<sup>20</sup>

Putnam's "societal historical determinist" approach would lead one to expect that these dense horizontal local associational webs would lead to extensive social capital accumulation throughout indigenous Mexico. If most communities survived with strong inherited stocks of social capital, then this capital should have grown over time through the cycles of "virtuous circles" he posits for Northern Italy. Instead, until very recently most of indigenous Mexico looked more like historical Southern Italy (dominated by vertical, authoritarian power relations). Incorporation into the national economy and political system led to increased micro-level subordination, and most local efforts at building autonomous representative organizations beyond the village level were repressed. If one turned to the other extreme, a "state-sanctioned repression dismantles horizontal organization" argument would predict no scaled-up social capital formation at all. Until recently, that is what one found in most of indigenous Mexico, with social capital limited to the micro level. When one looks at the last two decades, however, it turns out that neither explanation is complete because in practice, both processes have been going on at the same time. For more than two decades, indigenous organizations

have been coming together from below and then been dismantled from above, as competing state actors have pushed for both outcomes.<sup>21</sup>

The result is a very uneven map, with extreme variation in the relative thickness of civil society in indigenous regions. Civil society is very thin in some regions, with citizens subordinated and divided by vertical, authoritarian clientelistic power relations, while other regions have vibrant civic movements for local-level political democracy and sophisticated producer and consumer cooperatives with thousands of members. The result is that within the broad category of indigenous civil society, there is great variation both between and within states.<sup>22</sup>

Tables 1 and 2 synthesize the results of on-going empirical research on contemporary rural Mexican politics, showing that social capital formation in indigenous regions follows several different paths, though seen historically they may end up being different stages of the same process.<sup>23</sup> The key descriptive variables that frame state-society relations in each region are the degree of repression and the thickness of civil society. Table 1 shows the different conceptual categories, and Table 2 shows how actual indigenous regions fit into the main scenarios in practice (as of early 1995).<sup>24</sup> Note that these categorizations refer to ethnically distinct regions rather than to "entire" ethnic groups. There is great diversity among different degrees and patterns of indigenous mobilization, within as well as between ethnic groups.<sup>25</sup>

At one extreme are consolidated enclaves of high levels of associational life and respect for political and ethnic pluralism. At another extreme are regions where communities are internally divided, lacking in horizontal associational life and dominated by authoritarian clientelism. In some of these regions levels of repression may be low, but only because autonomous collective action is rare. One finds other scenarios in between: regions where autonomous social organization is spreading but faces political competition from the government's new, more sophisticated semi-clientelism (Fox, 1994b). Then

Table 1. *Political space and social capital outcomes in rural Mexico*

Social capital level	Regional level of repression	
	Low	High
High	Pluralist enclaves (the result of successful prior mobilization against authoritarian rule)	Mobilization against authoritarian rule, unresolved (potential "dual political power" situation)
Medium	Semi-clientelist competition between state and civil society (state control exercised more with inducements than with coercion)	Growing societal challenge to authoritarian rule (coercion has contradictory impact, both encouraging and discouraging protest)
Low	Authoritarian rule rarely challenged and therefore rarely punished	Forced demobilization (aftermath of blocked challenge to authoritarian rule)

Table 2. *Social/geographical distribution of indigenous social capital in rural Mexico*

"Subnational political regimes"	States (regions within states)
Pluralist enclaves	Oaxaca (Juchitán, Sierra Norte, parts of Mazateca Alta); Michoacán (parts of Purépecha region); Sonora (Yaqui region)
Semi-clientelist competition	Oaxaca (parts of Mazateca Alta, Central Valleys); Michoacán (parts of Purépecha region); Hidalgo (Náhu region); Puebla (parts of Sierra Norte); most of Yucatán, Campeche, Quintana Roo, state of Mexico
Authoritarian rule under challenge	Chiapas (most of Altos, Lacandon, Sierra Norte, Sierra Sur), Tabasco (Chol region), Guerrero (Alto Balsas, Montaña, Costa Chica); Oaxaca (Northern Isthmus, Pinotepa, parts of Mixteca); Hidalgo (parts of Huasteca)
Authoritarian rule dominant	Veracruz (Sierra Zongólica, most of Huasteca), Hidalgo (parts of Huasteca); Guerrero (parts of Montaña); Oaxaca (parts of Mixteca); Puebla (parts of Mixteca, Sierra Norte); Chihuahua (Raramuri region)

there are areas of strong associational life that are actively attacked by hard-liners in the state or their societal allies. These areas, in the upper right box, begin to approach "dual political power," where civil society and authoritarian elites confront each other in an unstable stalemate.

"Dual political power" describes much of indigenous Chiapas — though not necessarily the original area of the Zapatista rebellion. Since the army incursion occupied and demobilized most of the region in revolt, it would fall into the lower right hand box. Much of the rest of the state's indigenous regions, however, fit into the upper right hand box. Civic mobilizations and land invasions erupted throughout many areas outside the region in revolt, targeting large landholdings and authoritarian local bosses (including a broad-based independent electoral campaign for the governorship).<sup>26</sup> In the course of 1994, diverse local civic movements managed to eject the ruling party mayors from more than one-third of the state's municipalities, installing instead *ad hoc*, pluralistic town councils that include human rights movements, cooperatives and ethnic rights groups. These new town councils in turned formed several "autonomous regional multi-ethnic governments" to increase their bargaining power with state and federal authorities. An even more striking example of "spillover effects" was seen in late 1995, when peace talks between the government and the Zapatistas included independent indigenous leaders from throughout Mexico.

#### 4. ACCUMULATING SOCIAL CAPITAL: POLITICAL PATHWAYS

Less than three decades ago, Mexican indigenous communities had not formed "scaled-up" representative organizations beyond the village level. Through cumulative cycles of conflict and cooperation, the social maps of diverse regions then spread out in the varied array of political outcomes depicted in Tables 1 and 2. These distinct patterns of state-society relations constitute distinct "subnational political regimes," ranging from entrenched regional authoritarian rebouts to enclaves of pluralism, with varying shades of grey in between.

Where autonomous indigenous organizations managed to consolidate, they did so by following one (or more) of three main causal pathways. As outlined in Table 3, these three main causal paths include: state-society convergence, involving the joint production of social capital between reformist state actors and local societal groups; local/external societal groups, such as church reformers, nongovernment organizations (NGOs) or political oppositionists; and independent emergence, where social capital was produced more independently by local societal movements for democratization, accountable governance or socioeconomic development. While these three categories are conceptually distinct, they often overlapped in practice. Some analysts use the term "coproduction" as shorthand to refer to coordinated joint efforts.<sup>27</sup>

Table 3. *Possible causal pathways for social capital accumulation*

State-society convergence:	Local/outsider societal collaboration:	Independent societal scaling up:
Coproduction between state reformists and local societal groups (synergistic collaboration)	Coproduction between local groups and external allies in civil society (religious, developmental, environmental, civic or political)	Bottom-up production of social capital through autonomous local social, civic or political/electoral initiatives in the absence of external support

(a) *State-society convergence*

The main patterns of collaborative production of social capital between state and societal actors took the form of successive initiatives by middle and lower level reformist government officials to recognize and to encourage relatively autonomous grassroots organization. This process of coproduction had cumulative effects, as the results of each cycle bolstered societal capacities to take advantage of the next opportunity. One can describe Mexico's diverse array of reformist programs and enclaves within programs in terms of three distinct cycles of openings from above, in the early 1970s, the early 1980s, and the early 1990s. Each reform opening was broader in some policy areas than others, and stronger in some regions than in others. Social organizations also varied in their willingness and capacity to take advantage of these openings from above. Their political strategies are key here: not all allies are perceived as such, while some who seem to be are not.

Figure 1 shows a stylized depiction of three cycles of openings from above that were partially occupied by mobilization from below.<sup>28</sup> The first and third of these openings were responses to pressures from below (as in the early-mid 1970s and late 1980s/early 1990s), while the second was driven more by independent shifts in the balance of forces within the ruling political elite (as in the early 1980s).<sup>29</sup> During each of these three periods, reformist officials managed to control part of the actual implementation of a small but significant subset of the government's diverse array of rural development programs. They were able to create institutional opportunities for grassroots participation in the implementation of development projects targeted to Mexico's poorest regions, including many indigenous regions that had never before experienced freedom of assembly and association beyond the village level. In each cycle, authoritarian or semi-clientelist elites were usually able to capture much of even the reform subset of programs. Autonomous participation beyond the local level was therefore not rep-

Figure 1. *Three cycles of openings for participation by autonomous social organizations in Mexican government rural development programs\**

Official Channels for Participation:	Cycle 1 (1973-76)	Cycle 2 (1979-82)	Cycle 3 (1990-94)
Local project selection			
Local project implementation			
Promotion of new, autonomous regional organizations			
Monitoring of regional level government policy implementation			
Networking of autonomous groups beyond regional level			
Direct control of program resource allocation by regional groups			
Authoritarian backlash followed by purge of reform program			

\*These cycles reflect only the most "pro-participation" subset of rural development programs implemented during each period. They are therefore never "typical" of rural development policy more generally.

representative of most actual policy implementation experiences. The kinds of participation highlighted here were the regional exception rather than the national rule. From the long-term point of view of the accumulation of social capital, however, some of these regional exceptions overlapped, cumulated and networked horizontally, eventually accounting for many of the regions where representative indigenous groups were consolidated by the mid-1990s.

In each cycle, discreet networks of government reformists were able to reach out to those societal organizations that had survived the previous cycles, and the participatory process was sometimes able to go further toward a transfer of state authority to greater power-sharing with autonomous, representative organizations. This shift in authority proceeded furthest in the case of the Regional Solidarity Funds for Indigenous Peoples, which — unlike any other branch of the National Solidarity Program (1989–94) — were designed to transfer regional-level decision making on issues of development resource allocation to ethnically and politically pluralistic councils of indigenous leaders. Indeed, the governor's purge of this reform program was one of the turning points along the path to the Chiapas rebellion, publicly signalling the closure of what little "political opportunity" for change within the system was left.<sup>30</sup> In consonance with the "two steps forward, one step back" dynamic of the "social capital accumulation through conflict" model sketched out above, each opening of access to the state was later closed by an authoritarian backlash — though in each case some social capital survived and not all reformists were purged.

(b) *Collaboration between local and external civil society organizations*

The second causal path of social capital formation is through coproduction with other actors from civil society. The Chiapas experience illustrates this process especially well, since the "state-society" partnership pathway was not open there. Not only is Chiapas one of Mexico's most authoritarian states, but it is a state where local and state-level elites managed to systematically block the operations of the same federal reform programs that were so crucial for creating new opportunities for autonomous regional organization-building in other rural states. Indeed, the survival of small but significant political spaces for autonomous grassroots organization in other comparably poor and violent regions is one reason why the rebellion's social and political resonance throughout rural Mexico was not expressed militarily.

One of the most important external allies for local efforts to consolidate representative organizations in Chiapas is the democratic wing of the Catholic

church. Because of the state's deep and longstanding penetration into the countryside, and because of Mexico's relatively small number of prodemocratization bishops, these external societal allies have managed to encourage the thickening of indigenous civil society in only a few regions, but Chiapas is one of them.<sup>31</sup> As in much of rural Mexico, nonpartisan networks of long-term democratic political opposition activists also provided key allies for many local grassroots movements, along with nongovernmental development organizations (Fox and Hernández, 1992).

When Samuel Ruíz became bishop of San Cristóbal de las Casas in the early 1960s, Chiapas highland communities were dominated by local indigenous elites whose authoritarian control was bolstered by their linkages with the state and national government (Rus, 1994). A decade later, when the Bishop convened the first autonomous, state-wide public indigenous forum (thanks to a brief rapprochement with the governor), his diocese had trained about 1,000 lay activists. These catechists promoted autonomous community organizations and local self-help projects. Fifteen years later the diocese had trained over 8,000 such local leaders.<sup>32</sup> Organizational support from the diocese was the most important single factor permitting collective action beyond the village level. This process spread and diversified in the 1980s, as secular regional producer associations grew, encouraged by limited and erratic support from state reformists (Harvey, 1988; 1990; 1994). Looking back from 1994, much of the thick web of social organizations built by the indigenous peoples of Chiapas originated with their first taste of "scaled up" freedom of expression and assembly in 1974.<sup>33</sup>

This "societal coproduction" scenario for thickening civil society in authoritarian environments also requires other kinds of external allies, both national and international. Nongovernmental development, human rights and environmental organizations have become major promoters of local organization-building efforts around the world, though in Mexico the preemptive power of the state has kept NGO development behind many other Latin American countries. Like state reformists and religiously-based societal allies, NGOs can both provide positive incentives for horizontal association as well as buffer the negative sanctions that would otherwise punish such efforts.<sup>34</sup> The internal dynamics of these alliances vary greatly, however, and both state and societal reformists often end up inducing subordinate semi-clientalism without actually engendering an autonomous thickening of civil society.<sup>35</sup> Because this risk pervades efforts to provide incentives for collective action, it is crucial to keep in mind their contribution as potential buffers for negative sanctions. It is also important to recall that such buffer efforts often fail, as the experience of liberation theology-inspired groups in El Salvador and Guatemala shows.<sup>36</sup>



(c) *Independent production of social capital from below*

Social capital can also grow and thicken independent of external allies, through sustained collective action by autonomous local social and political movements. Some of these groups are socioeconomic, building community-based economic development alternatives, others are civic, fighting for nonpartisan democratic, accountable government at the local level, while others promote a partisan opposition alternative.<sup>37</sup> Leaders of such movements often gained prior political experience far from home, but that does not mean that they brought allies home with them. In some cases they involved local defections from the ruling corporatist party, while other local movements have independently promoted alternative civic identities, often with a strong ethnic dimension, as in the case of the electoral, social and cultural democratization of Oaxaca's Zapotec market town of Juchitán. Yet even in this "paradigm case" of bottom-up, identity-based mobilization, the movement was able to emerge in the first place by taking advantage of an opening within the ruling political class in the early 1970s. Juchitán's subsequent waves of mobilization, repression and renewed mobilization, eventually leading to municipal electoral democratization, are quite consistent with the three-actor "political construction" approach proposed above. While mobilization from below was fundamental, the local movement developed increasingly important national political alliances, and made its greatest progress when reform-oriented elites controlled state politics.<sup>38</sup>

The Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) is a more extreme example of social capital formation in what appears to be the complete absence of external allies. By the early 1990s, growing authoritarian attacks on the main external allies of moderate autonomous social groups in Chiapas — federal reformists and the bishop — dramatically changed the political opportunity structure seen from below. The promised path of gradual change through working within the system seemed to lead only to more repression. In this context, Zapatistas had been organizing in complete isolation from the rest of Mexico's political opposition, and they began to win over many of the already-organized in Chiapas. For more than a year, many dozens, probably hundreds of villages debated whether to take up arms in open assemblies (though they debated in their own languages, and were therefore unintelligible to most government officials). This process produced a powerful indicator of the trust and loyalties woven into the dense webs of horizontal association: in spite of the fact that many communities were deeply divided over whether to take up arms, no one defected, so the government was still caught completely by surprise when the rebellion erupted on January 1, 1994. Looking at this another way, the lack

of reform opportunities within the system caused broad-based societal organizations to split over the decision of whether to take up arms.

In terms of its origins, the Zapatista movement seems to be an extraordinary example of how grassroots organizations can broaden and deepen without external alliances. Two major qualifiers are in order, however. First, much of its organizing took advantage of the preexisting networks that had been created with support from the bishop and/or government reformists (the other two paths for coproduction of social capital). In addition, once the rebellion was launched, it was the mobilization of external civil society allies at national and international levels, as well as deep divisions within the ruling political class, that prompted the president to declare a unilateral cease-fire after less than two weeks of fighting, rather than pursue a Central American-style military "solution." In the course of the ups and downs of the negotiation process that followed, it was the Zapatistas' capacity to maintain a diverse set of national and international civil society alliances that allowed them to remain a political force in spite of what turned out to be their military weakness. So even in this extreme case of "strictly" bottom-up consolidation of civil society in one of Mexico's most remote indigenous regions, external allies turned out to be crucial to the movement's capacity to survive.<sup>39</sup>

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

While many localized rural social movements have emerged independently from below, external linkages have long been seen as crucial for their capacity to scale up and consolidate larger scale representative organizations under authoritarian conditions. In the literature, however, most of the attention to this issue is limited to one subset of the broader category of societal organizations: the emergence of revolutionary challenges to dictatorships. For example, Wolf's classic comparative analysis of rural revolutions saw societal capacity to sustain revolutionary challenges to authoritarian rule as driven by the "tactical mobility" of "middle peasants" (who are socially and geographically autonomous from the state and landlords), together with urban-based allies.<sup>40</sup> The difference here is the attempt to explain the thickening of rural social webs under authoritarian conditions that do not lead to revolutionary situations; that is, most of the time.<sup>41</sup> Indeed, one of the main lessons from the Mexican experience is the need to "unpack" the notion of authoritarian rule to distinguish both the importance of varying degrees of repression and the possibility that factions within even authoritarian regimes can produce allies for autonomous collective action from below.

More than two decades of repeated cycles of collective action have left an uneven map of social

organizations in the Mexican countryside, ranging from enclaves of local democracy to large and entrenched redoubts of authoritarian rule, with complex grey areas of semi-clientalism in between. These diverse outcomes emerged through analytically distinct political pathways, though they often overlapped in practice. The first pathway was the coproduction of social capital between state reformists and local societal groups willing and able to take advantage of openings from above, involving limited but substantive participation in the implementation of government development programs. The second pathway involves external nongovernmental actors that provide support to local and regional organizing efforts, such as church, development and human rights groups. The third path is more independent of external allies, and — not coincidentally — of a more overtly oppositional political character. But even this last path, as the Zapatista rebellion suggests, requires external societal support to maintain sufficient political space to survive the inevitable authoritarian backlash.

The challenge that remains is how to distinguish the different contributions made by these processes of coproduction, as well as the diverse social imprints they leave. Since state and external societal allies provide a variety of contributions to social capital formation, often simultaneously, it is both logically and empirically difficult to determine their relative weights. Cast most broadly, however, both state and external societal allies provide resources for local collective action that can be divided into positive and “anti-negative” incentives. Positive incentives range from direct individual and group material inducements, tangible and intangible rewards for the exercise of leadership, as well as enabling institutional frameworks and ideological resources that reduce “free rider” problems. “Anti-negative” resources, in contrast, reduce the costs that other external actors may threaten to impose on those engaged in constructing autonomous social capital: in other words, some degree of protection from retribution. External allies often play crucial roles in limiting the state-sanctioned repression that would normally dismantle most bottom-up efforts at scaling up local representative organizations (though such protective efforts also often fail). Since the broadening and deepening of autonomous social capital requires freedom of association, the positive and anti-negative incentives provided to those groups that defend the right to associational autonomy have powerful potential “public good” multiplier effects.

Much of the research on external allies has focused on the positive resources they offer local communities, often stressing their efforts at “consciousness-raising.” In various countries, community organizing efforts by both state and external societal actors are widely seen as contributing greatly to the emergence of social movements and political democratization. Perhaps the spaces for group reflection created by Christian Base Communities or literacy campaigns encouraged collective action because they influenced the way people think about the world. But just because that was the goal of the external actors does not mean that it was their main effect. One could also argue that their primary contribution to collective action was to create a relatively safe opportunity for people to come together who would otherwise be afraid of state repression, which in turn permitted them to learn leadership and action skills that could then be used in other kinds of mobilization. In other words, although government-sponsored community organizers or church-linked social action may well work to “raise” consciousness at certain times and places, their greater significance may be that their presence and legitimacy can permit people who were already well aware of their oppression to expect less retribution from collective action.

The politics of fear must be a crucial element in any explanation of the inherently uneven “thickness” of civil society, especially under authoritarian rule. Those who work to reduce the fear of retribution, whether subjectively, objectively or both, powerfully change the political opportunity structure within which individuals and groups decide whether and how to act. If so, then concerted action can — sometimes, to some degree — overcome historically inherited legacies. Coming back to the broad question about the determinants of social capital accumulation, this suggests that — in contrast to the predetermination inherent in Putnam’s explanation of social capital accumulation — historical legacies are woven deeply into social fabrics, but those imprints are not necessarily fixed by history. The widely varying “thicknesses” of indigenous Mexican civil society and their diverse origins show that political conflict is critical, both within the state and between competing state-society coalitions, in explaining how representative societal organizations survive, consolidate and develop bargaining power. Densely woven social fabrics can be unraveled by state-sanctioned coercion, on the one hand, while external allies from either state or society can help to weave or reweave them on the other.

## NOTES

1. Putnam's study of Italian regional governments is the most developed example of such an effort, combining cross-sectional regional comparison with study of change over time (1993). For an especially nuanced cross-national study of related issues, see Crook and Manor (1994).
2. This concept of "stock" has both advantages and disadvantages. While sociologists might claim that "social capital" is simply a new term for societal networks and organizations, the notion of stock has the useful implication that these relationships can be accumulated, though investment is required, as Ostrom suggested. Stocks can also be "decapitalized," through societal conflict, such as civil war. The problem with the notion of "stock," however, is that it implies that social relationships are basically homogeneous, and that the density of micro levels of organization is an indicator of other kinds of "public good" societal organization. This article argues that social capital is not necessarily "continuously distributed," either horizontally "across" often segmented societies, or vertically from local to broader levels of organization.
3. Putnam's explanation of social capital accumulation is very historical and exclusively society-driven. He goes back to the 12th and 13th centuries to compare the different ways in which northern Italian city-states organized themselves in terms of local voluntary corporations, versus the way feudal autocrats dominated southern Italy. In this view, northern society started out "horizontal" and participatory while the south was "vertical" and authoritarian. In this view, stocks of social capital grow as they are used, trust and reciprocity beget more trust and reciprocity, leading to *virtuous circles* of capital accumulation. Similarly, where societies are dominated by vertical power relations, authoritarian clientelism and widespread mutual mistrust in society, one finds *vicious circles* that prevent the accumulation of social capital. This framework explains social capital accumulation in terms of two *equilibrium* scenarios for high and low "civicness," each one driven by their respective historical legacies. Putnam concludes: "As with conventional capital, those who have social capital tend to accumulate more — 'them as has, gets'" (1993, p. 169). In this view, in other words, deliberate action and strategy cannot create social capital. For useful historically based critiques, see Morlino (1995) and Tarrow (forthcoming).
4. For theoretical elaboration, see Fox (1992a), chapter 2. This framework is consistent with Tarrow (1994) and the emerging "state-in-society" approach in Migdal, Kohli and Shue (1994).
5. One problem here is that political science lacks conceptual explanations of the determinants of varying levels of state repression against citizens. The most common framework is a "pressure-response" model of authoritarian regimes, where increased societal mobilization provokes state efforts to control society. As Stanley points over, however, comparable levels of societal mobilization can face vastly differing levels of state repression, whether one looks over time in the same country or at similar moments in different countries (1996). He combines state-society interaction with intrastate politics, interest and ideologies to explain state terror in El Salvador.
6. Thanks to Elinor Ostrom for suggesting this reference. She also observed that "fear of retribution may be weighted more heavily than the 'real' punishments that can be meted out."
7. See McAdam's "political process" approach (1982).
8. I am grateful to Gerardo Munck for this observation.
9. For a related but different use of the concept of "scaling up," see Annis (1988).
10. As Granovetter pointed out, local groups with strong internal ties may lack links with nearby counterparts, blocking the perception of broader shared interests even in the face of an immediate threat (1973).
11. Some neighboring villages have long histories of direct conflict, especially over land rights, though Dennis has shown that the state systematically encouraged such conflicts since the colonial period (1987).
12. On human rights violations in rural Mexico, see, among others, Americas Watch (1990) and Amnesty International (1986).
13. Olson made this point when discussing how the number of producers of certain commodities shaped their prospects for collective action, since large numbers of dispersed farmers of homogeneous crops would face much greater free-rider problems than concentrated numbers of producers of specialized crops (1986). Marx made a similar observation long before, however, in his famous comment on the collective action problems of smallholders. Their family-based mode of production, poverty and poor means of communication, "isolates them from one another instead of bringing them into mutual intercourse . . . In so far as there is merely a local interconnection among these small peasants, and the identity of their interests begets no unity, no national union and no political organization, they . . . cannot represent themselves (from "the Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte," cited in Tucker, 1978: 608). Except for the assertion that the peasant mode of production makes self-representation inherently impossible, the other structural obstacles to collective action Marx cites are remarkably Olsonian.
14. The conventional political science view grants political parties the role of aggregating diverse interests, but in practice few political parties have actually represented the most disenfranchised members of their societies, especially in the case of ethnic minorities. Even those few programmatic parties whose ideologies drive them to attempt to represent the most excluded are susceptible to the top-down, bureaucratizing tendencies of the "iron law of oligarchy." On the problems of representation of peasants within radical and reformist political parties in Latin America, see Fox (1992c). For an analysis of the determinants of the ebbs and flows of the "iron law of oligarchy" and degrees of internal democracy in a prototypical regional peasant union in Mexico, see Fox (1992b).

15. Since the early 1980s, Mexican regional organizations have been forming state-wide and national networks that united around common socioeconomic interests while respecting each other's political differences and internal autonomy (Fox and Gordillo, 1989).
16. This section draws from Fox (1994a), which was influenced by O'Donnell and Schmitter (1986).
17. Since reformists are defined here by their actions; their attitudes and interests are necessarily diverse and politically contingent. They tend to be united by a long-term view of state interests, involving a willingness to sacrifice the interests of local elites and tolerate some degree of conflict in order to incorporate social movements that might otherwise threaten political stability. This process also involves building their own potential political base. In undemocratic electoral systems, state reformists are more likely to be based in central government's social and development agencies rather than in the electoral apparatus. Reformists tend to differ between those who tolerate relatively autonomous societal organization as a means versus those who support them as an end in itself. Reformists are most likely to be able to offset more authoritarian rivals within the state when the more "instrumental" moderate manage to form coalitions with the more "ideological" democratic officials (Fox, 1992a).
18. Societal capacity to pry windows of opportunity open further depends on both prior accumulations of social capital and conjunctural political strategies. Some opportunities are simply missed while others are creatively pushed beyond what seemed possible at the time.
19. For recent analyses of indigenous community decision-making in the state of Oaxaca, see Collins (1995), Díaz Montes (1992) and Fox and Aranda (1994), among others.
20. Hirabayashi uses the notion of "cultural capital" to explore the maintenance of local village solidarities in spite of migration to large cities (1993). Most indigenous groups that survived the conquest reacted by retreating to seek community autonomy outside of the colonized areas, in so-called "regions of refuge". Very few are truly isolated today; most became fully "incorporated" into the national market and political regime by the mid-20th century.
21. For overviews of regional indigenous movements in Mexico, see Mejía Pineros and Sarmiento Silva (1987), Moguel, Botey and Hernández (1992) and Warman and Argueta (1993), as well as the journals *Ojarasca* and *Cuadernos Agrarios*.
22. For a related focus on the uneven development of democratic institutions under actually existing electoral regimes, see O'Donnell (1993).
23. The regional categorizations are therefore neither complete nor definitive.
24. If nonindigenous peasant regions were also included, the main differences would be that more regions could be counted as pluralistic, mainly where state-level electoral victories by the center-right National Action Party appear to have dismantled much of the ruling party's clientelistic control apparatus (e.g., Chihuahua, Baja California Norte, Guanajuato). In general, however, there is a similar diversity of state-society relations in nonindigenous rural areas. Local solidarities differ widely, and those with strong inherited collective identities were shaped largely by "foundational moments" dating from the revolution and the state-structured land reform that followed in the 1930s (as Michoacán, Veracruz or La Laguna region). Many regions experienced little land reform, however, such as Chiapas.
25. It is difficult to sustain political generalizations across "entire" ethnic groups. One might suppose that the less assimilated groups might have the greatest capacity for resistance, but some do while others remain extremely vulnerable (the Mixe vs. the Huichol or Raramuri, for example). The larger groups are quite internally heterogeneous in terms of culture, language and forms of political organization, such as the Nahuatl, Maya, Zapotec and the Mixtec.
26. Not coincidentally, the secret ballot was violated in at least 68% of Chiapas polling places, according to Mexico's independent election observer movement (Alianza Cívica, 1994). For further analysis of the politics of the secret ballot, see Fox (1996).
27. For an early formulation of the term "coproduction," see Parks *et al.* (1982).
28. This table synthesizes the comparative discussion of PIDER, CONASUPO-COPLAMAR and the Regional Solidarity Funds presented in Fox (1994a; 1994b). For a study of one regional organization's evolution in response to these shifts in political opportunities, see Fox (1992b). See Cornelius, Craig and Fox (1994) for diverse analyses of the political dynamics of the National Solidarity Program.
29. See Fox (1992a). More generally, these cycles of openings are related to splits within the regime over the terms of state intervention. In spite of recent market openings, in Mexico the key issue is not whether the state will intervene to regulate markets, but rather which state-society partnership will benefit. The three cycles of rural development innovations were led by reformists willing to use state intervention to break entrenched local elite monopolies by encouraging competition from community-managed economic enterprises. Notably, the announced withdrawal of the Mexican state from intervening in rural economic life that was so widely applauded in the early 1990s actually involved a reinsertion of state intervention, in some ways even deeper than ever before. For details, see Fox (1995).
30. Rather than side with his own federal reformists, Mexico's president chose to accept this purge and then promoted the governor to the cabinet post responsible for the police, politics and the upcoming presidential elections (he was removed in the aftermath of the rebellion, however).
31. It should be noted that the key factors that influenced the contribution of religious activists to horizontal social capital formation are often determined by far-away institutional church politics, since it is the shifting balance of forces within the hierarchy that determines whether progressive clergy become bishops and where they are assigned. For example, in order for Christian Base Communities to spread sufficiently to contribute significantly to the formation of prodemocracy

movements under authoritarian regimes, they needed the support of a prodemocracy bishop. Without the sustained institutional legitimacy and resources that only a bishop can provide within a given territory, other change-oriented organizing efforts are likely to be limited to tiny, politically vulnerable enclaves, with few horizontal spillover effects. This process is also interactive. As Charlene Floyd observed, Bishop Ruiz, like his Salvadoran counterpart Oscar Romero, was greatly influenced by the grassroots communities he worked with (personal communication).

32. Interview with Javier Vargas, an associate of the bishop since the early 1960s and a former diocesan priest. For one of the few analyses of church-grassroots movement relations in Mexico, see Muro (1994). For an overview of religion, social movements and development in Latin America more generally, see, among others, Lehmann (1990).

33. The right-wing attacks on the bishop in the months immediately preceding the rebellion brought over 15,000 indigenous people down from the mountains to march in his defense. This was the largest public protest in the history of Chiapas until that date, even larger than the 1992 protest against the 500th anniversary of the Spanish conquest, when the statue of the conqueror was torn down as a prelude to the 1994 rebellion.

34. As David Brown argues, "NGOs can play critical roles in fostering cooperation among unequally powerful parties where the aim is to solve social problems, and that cooperative problem-solving can in turn create social capital" (1994, p. 1).

35. It should be pointed out that the harmony, balance and empowerment often attributed to NGO-grassroots relations is more often assumed than demonstrated. For example, for a powerful critique of NGO organizing styles that clashed with indigenous social organization, see Rivera Cusicanqui (1990).

36. The contribution of external societal actors raises the question of the role of international actors. The Catholic

church is an international organization, not to mention the human rights groups, environmental organizations and development agencies that provide political and economic resources to local counterparts. When do these international actors simply strengthen the various local and national "vectors," and when do they play a truly independent causal role?

37. Empirically, this independent pathway has tended to follow the civic or political route, while the state-society partnership has encouraged the socio-economic organizations (largely because state reformists had more room for maneuver to support local movements that competed with local economic elites than to support those that challenged local political elites).

38. For nuanced analyses of Juchitán's COCEI (Coalition of Workers, Students and Peasants of the Isthmus), see Campbell (1994) and Rubin (1994; forthcoming). COCEI managed an uneasy alliance with the main center-left national opposition party, at the same time as it bargained independently (and successfully) for federal resources for better municipal services.

39. For English language sources on the Zapatista rebellion, see, among others, Collier (1994), Fox (1994c), Harvey (1994) and Hernández (1994), as well as the special issues of *Cultural Survival* (Spring, 1994) and *Akwekon, A Journal of Indigenous Affairs* (Summer, 1994). Among the many diverse Spanish-language sources, contrast Hernández (1995) and Tello Díaz (1995).

40. For a useful contrast, see Walton's analogous comparison of failed rebellions (1984).

41. The "everyday forms of resistance" approach has contributed greatly to our understanding of the hidden political subtexts of apparent subaltern "consent" (Scott, 1985; Kerkvliet, 1990). Perhaps a synthesis with the political construction approach would help to account for the "everyday politics of organization-building."

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